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# Allegiances || PetalClan

**L E A D E R** ;; Heatherstar - a creamish-yellow she-cat with darker patterns and yellow eyes

**D E P U T Y** ;; none

**M E D I C I N E  C A T** ;; Adderflight - a reddish-brown tabby tom with dark yellow eyes

**W A R R I O R S** ;;

Finchtuft - light brown tom with white stripes

Sorrelflame - dark brown she-cat with darker paws, belly, and muzzle, and dark, deep, piercing blue eyes

Quailnose - a white tom with brown splotches and a brown nose

Mousewhisker - brown tom with white markings and darker brown swirling patterns

**A P P R E N T I C E S** ;;

none

**Q U E E N S** ;;

none

**K I T S** ;;

none

**E L D E R S** ;;

none

# Allegiances || SquirrelClan

**L E A D E R** ;; Yellowstar - brown-red she-cat with piercing green eyes

**D E P U T Y** ;; none

**M E D I C I N E  C A T** ;; Shrewfoot - pale cream tom

**W A R R I O R S** ;;

Mossheart - dark brown mottled she-cat

Nutgaze - short-furred white she-cat with black stripes, paws, chest, and muzzle, with yellow eyes

Talondust - brown-and-white tom with tabby stripes

**A P P R E N T I C E S** ;;

Whitepaw - calico she-cat

**Q U E E N S** ;;

none

**K I T S** ;;

none

**E L D E R S** ;;

none

# Allegiances || PineClan

**L E A D E R** ;; Robinstar - mottled gray she-cat

**D E P U T Y** ;; none

**M E D I C I N E  C A T** ;; Lilybreeze - calico she-cat with yellow eyes

**W A R R I O R S** ;;

Rainpad - ashy-grayish tom with darker splotches

Duckfrost - dark brown tom with mackerel stripes

Troutfur - long-furred russian blue she-cat with black paws, tail-tip, tabby stripes, belly, and muzzle with yellow eyes

Logbite - strong brown she-cat

**A P P R E N T I C E S** ;;

**Q U E E N S** ;;

none

**K I T S** ;;

none

**E L D E R S** ;;

none

# Allegiances || MudClan

**L E A D E R** ;; Stonestar - plain gray tom

**D E P U T Y** ;; none

**M E D I C I N E  C A T** ;; Hazelberry - a tortoiseshell she-cat with long fur and a white chest

**W A R R I O R S** ;;

Meadowdapple - a creamish-yellow she-cat with black, brown, and white dapples with sparkling green eyes

Flintpath - gray tom with white tabby stripes and copper eyes

Heronleap - a white tom with black and gray speckles

Sedgestorm - white tom with silvery tabby stripes and green eyes

**A P P R E N T I C E S** ;;

Owlpaw - thin, soft furred dark brown tom with white paws, belly, chest, muzzle, and warm golden eyes

**Q U E E N S** ;;

none

**K I T S** ;;

none

**E L D E R S** ;;

none

# || prologue

First, went the kits.

It was Lilyblossom first, from MudClan. The lithe, light brown tabby she-cat started with the terrible cough. It was not a pleasant noise to be heard from the nursery, of any place. Hazelberry's initial reaction was that she had contracted a small bout of coughing. It was only green-leaf, yet cats were already coughing? Hazelberry thought nothing of it, and sent her hardworking apprentice, Fennelpaw, to go and cure it. Fennelpaw was not as passive, however. He immediately moved the lithe tabby to the medicine cat's den to try and heal her. She died within in the next quarter-moon.

The entire nursery was sick with that... that... cough, the hacking and full-sounding cough. Lilyblossom claimed, before her death, that she had received the cough from someone at the Gathering she knew as Acorntail, a white and brown tom. They were known friends through the Clan, and Hazelberry thought nothing of it. She passed it off until the entire nursery was coughing and had foaming lips. Some even had progressed to the last stage, which included delirium. Those were other symptoms of the sickness, which did not have a name. Yes, names had been suggested, some of which included Foamed Mouth, Hacking Cough, Deathcough, Foamcough, and other interesting names, but all had been declined.

The nursery was gone within a moon and a quarter.

Elders of MudClan had already contracted the sickness, and so had the other Clans. Every full-moon at the Gathering, each of the Clans had sent at least two sick cats, coughing and some even had the next stage with foaming mouths. Generally, cats had known what this sickness was by now, but everyone refused to believe it was bad. Only after most of the elders died, the nursery was empty, some of the warriors were dead, and the apprentices were lacking did they start to take some initiative.

For example, PetalClan began using catmint, of which they had plenty. It didn't work. SquirrelClan wanted to just send the sick cats away altogether, in an abandoned twoleg nest. It was green-leaf after all, nearing leaf-fall. The sickness had been raging the Clans for nearly four moons now, and the Clans were dwindling already on cats. All four Clans had no kits, queens, elders, one had a medicine cat apprentice, and two had no deputy. They had seven or eight warriors, maybe nine, and two or three apprentices. The leaders were ordered to stay away from any sick cats, and the medicine cats were rarely ever in their dens. The warriors were told to quickly grab the herbs they were using to heal them and deliver them to the sick cats so they wouldn't risk contaminating themselves.

Most cats had waves of grief on their shoulders by now, with everyone getting sick. Nobody knew what to do.

The leaders of the Clan had a meeting with their medicine cats on the very first moon of leaf-fall, or somewhere around there. Nobody really kept track of the time anymore, except the leaders and medicine cats. At the meeting, they discussed what to do. They did not come up with a plan, however. They argued.

"We should send the currently sick cats away," declared Yellowstar, SquirrelClan's leader. "in order to contain the sickness. There is an abandoned twoleg nest near the edges of my territory. We can send them there."

"No." Robinstar, PineClan's leader, countered. "We cannot do that! Then they will just die out there!" At this, Lilybreeze - who was PineClan's medicine cat - nodded in agreement, and PetalClan's medicine cat - Adderflight - flicked his tail agreeably.

PetalClan's leader put in her opinion. "For StarClan's sake! We can't send them away. We just have to just find a cure!" Heatherstar meowed.

"There *is* no cure!" Lilybreeze snapped. "Heatherstar, you began using catmint, and even *that* did not cure it!"

This type of arguing went on for a few hours, and eventually the

medicine cats agreed on something they hoped to StarClan their leaders would comply with.

"Everyone, stop arguing. We have something you might agree with," announced Hazelberry, MudClan's medicine cat. They listened; Heatherstar shut her mouth, Robinstar and Yellowstar stop glaring at each other, and Stonestar - MudClan's leader - flicked an ear.

"The medicine cats of each Clan will go out each quarter moon and consult StarClan, but only one medicine cat per quarter moon. I," meowed Shrewfoot, SquirrelClan's medicine cat, "will be going first. Then goes Lilybreeze, and then Hazelberry and Fennelpaw. After they go, Adderflight will go last."

"If StarClan provides us answers," Fennelpaw butted in excitedly, "they will be delivered straight to our leaders. If StarClan sees us suffering, they surely cannot leave us in the dark to die."

Heatherstar was immediately in on it, as was Robinstar. Yellowstar considered her choices, her green eyes calculating swiftly. Stonestar also looked interested, but his flattened ears seemed to not agree.

"Okay," Stonestar nodded, glancing at Yellowstar. The brown-red she-cat inclined her head.

"Then it will go into effect immediately!" Lilybreeze exclaimed.

The Clan cats left to their camps with an aura of hope surrounding them. In PetalClan's generous camp, everyone appeared excited. In Yellowstar's intelligent home, they all agreed that this plan would surely work. In Robinstar's Clan, the bouncy cats of PineClan were immediately jumping onto the plan and tackling it with anticipation. In MudClan, they shared a sense of silent happiness; StarClan could not ignore their calls any longer. Could they?

Well, it turns out StarClan can ignore them for a little longer.

None of the cats got answers and suddenly nobody had hope. No one knew what to do. It was a moon and a half into leaf-fall. Hope had been lost, like the rest of the elders and Fennelpaw, MudClan's medicine cat apprentice. The deputies had also died, and no new

ones had been chosen. Hazelberry blamed StarClan for Fennelpaw's death, because, if they had cared, they would've spared the poor apprentice's life.

Soon, Hazelberry begrudgingly forgave StarClan, however they did not send any signs as she thought they would. Stonestar, the leader of MudCan, was reserved - like normal - in his thoughts about StarClan's silence, yet he was irritated. Why would they not answer for so long? Did they want the Clans to fall? Maybe they were testing them. But why would they take so many cats to do it? Only two of the Clans had one apprentice, and they had fewer and fewer warriors. MudClan was considered fairly good fighters and reserved in their thoughts, but Stonestar was finished with StarClan not helping them. No cat from MudClan received StarClan's words.

PineClan had different opinions. The bouncy and kind Clan had always believed strongly in StarClan, especially their leaders, deputies, and medicine cats. Robinstar believed the StarClan cats could not help them, for the mysterious cats in the sky did not even know how to cure it. However, Logbite, one of her warriors, was doubtful about her leader's opinion. Logbite had always been loyal and was not about to break this trend, but she was not believing in this spiel that her leader had come up with. Logbite would not say the words of faithlessness to anyone, however, in fear that she would be shamed. PineClan was split on opinions, and no one in PineClan got words of StarClan.

However, SquirrelClan tried to logically think about what could've happened to the mysterious StarClan. Their leader, Yellowstar, always took an intelligent way of thinking. Yellowstar believed they truly did not know a cure for this sickness, or they did and were waiting until something explosive happened between the Clans in order to tell them. One of her warriors, Mossheart, was curious as to why she thought this. StarClan surely could not keep this cure a secret for much longer, and they'd have to tell soon. Yellowstar explained to the mottled she-cat that the reason they could not tell was that nothing prophetic had happened. No one truly important had died - she was very sad when telling this part, to which she added on about deputies and medicine cat apprentices - and they cannot do anything about it. Nobody from SquirrelClan received

StarClan's guidance.

Yet, Heatherstar believed differently. PetalClan had always been generous and quick-footed. Heatherstar believed that StarClan would not give them an answer due to everyone not believing strongly enough. Eventually, claimed Heatherstar, they'd tell the news of the cure to cats who believed very solidly that StarClan would tell them the cure and no doubt clouded their actions. Many cats had begun to be irritated and impatient with StarClan, who would not tell them a single thing, and this was the cause for the absence of StarClan's guidance. Cats in PetalClan believed steadily in this, and they thought that perhaps they'd be the first to receive words of StarClan. But they did not get it either.

This brings us to present.

And now, all they can hope for is a sign.

# || chapter one

Stonestar, a plain gray tom, sat atop the highrock, a ledge in MudClan's camp. The cats of MudClan lived in a dip on a hill. Their territory was dotted with rocks, and plain-like. His tail curled over his paws, ears perked, as he watched as his Clanmates slowly awoke.

First was Flintpath, a gray tom with white tabby stripes. He was almost always the first cat up, due to his frequent nightmares of Briarstripe's death. Briarstripe was his mate, a few moons ago, and she had died due to the sickness raging in the Clans. She had been a strong-hearted warrior who always believed one day herself and Flintpath would have kits. She died too early for that to ever happen.

Stonestar flicked his tail in greeting to Flintpath, who inclined his head deeply. The gray and white tabby tom sat down near the nursery, looking into the empty den, copper eyes shadowed sadly. His eyes glanced over to the fresh-kill pile, which had a stale-looking mouse and a slightly plump bird.

Then, Heronleap and Meadowdapple emerged from the warriors den, both looking tired. Meadowdapple, nor Heronleap had mates, but the two had grown closer as their family and friends died around them. Meadowdapple's creamish-yellow pelt looked freshly groomed, the dapples on her back shiny. Heronleap's white pelt looked clean too.

Sedgestorm came out last, flicking his tail. He spotted with green eyes that nearly everyone was awake. He glanced at the apprentice's den, wondering briefly when the only apprentice in the Clan would awaken. Sedgestorm licked his pelt, white-and-silver tabby, as he waited for his apprentice to emerge from his den.

A dark brown tom appeared from the apprentice's den, his warm golden eyes glittering, as he realized that everyone was awake.

"Oh, hello," he murmured to his mentor - Sedgestorm - and he flicked his tail in a greeting to the other cats of the Clan. *Did I really sleep in that late?* The apprentice wondered briefly, but the thought subsided.

Stonestar sat up straight, and raised his tail. The cats of MudClan gathered instinctively, and sat down.

"For patrols," the gray tom began, observing the states of his warriors and apprentice. "Sedgestorm, Owlpaw, you can patrol the borders. Heronleap, go hunting, and Meadowdapple, you can stay here for now." Then, Stonestar added, "Sedgestorm, Owlpaw, Heronleap, you three can share prey. Meadowdapple and I will eat the other one."

As the luminous sun rose higher into the sky, the cats of MudClan dispersed. Meadowdapple padded over to the fresh-kill pile, grabbing the mouse and sat down. Stonestar joined her momentarily.

Owlpaw went over to the pile of prey, which only consisted of a bird. He grabbed it and turned around to see Sedgestorm, his mentor, and Heronleap.

The brown tom sat down with the prey in his jaws and he dropped it, taking two small bites and then pushing it away to the other two.

"You'll need it more than me, anyways," he meowed to them, getting up and walking away from the prey. If he looked at it, he'd want more. He shivered, his thin, soft fur easily getting penetrated by the winds of leaf-fall.

Soon, Owlpaw noticed the two warriors finished the bird. Padding out of camp, Owlpaw glanced over his shoulder to see them following. He slowed down, letting his mentor take the lead.

"No, you go, Owlpaw," Sedgestorm meowed, to which the brown-furred apprentice felt surprise leap up inside him. He could lead a warrior to the borders?

His white paws sped up as he headed to the border MudClan shared

with SquirrelClan. Owlpaw and his mentor approached the border, and the apprentice instinctively scented the air. *No fresh scent,* Owlpaw thought, ear flicking, *but SquirrelClan marked their border yesterday. Not today, yet.*

He began to mark the borders, Sedgestorm doing the same.

Soon, they finished.

"Okay, let's go to PineClan, then," Owlpaw's mentor told him, and the white-and-silver tabby started towards PineClan. Owlpaw followed, his white paws working swiftly to catch up. He tried very hard not to think of the sickness that consumed everyone's thoughts. Every day this happened; everyone woke up, never spoke of the illness, and did not discuss it. The day carried on as normal. Stonestar ordered patrols, everyone ate, and then went off to do their separate things. Often, everyone went to sleep early. Currently there was nobody terribly sick in MudClan, but occasionally you could hear a cough from the warriors den.

As they arrived at PineClan, Sedgestorm stopped abruptly, tail raising and fur brushing up.

"I smell cats," he murmured.

Owlpaw gave a soft growl. MudClan was known for their fighting skills, and considered the reserved Clan. Perhaps that was why there was sometimes scents across their border. Before the illness raged the Clans, there used to be extensive clashes between MudClan and the other Clans, due to them crossing borders. They always had been reticent, and that often lead to the other Clans passing their borders even if it was to get a morsel of prey. The MudClan cats had decided they needed to teach them a lesson, and fought with the power of StarClan to get them away from their territory.

Then, a mottled gray she-cat stepped into their sight.

*Robinstar!*

The thought echoed in Owlpaw's mind. The leader of PineClan

stood in front of the three MudClan cats, a dark brown-and-mackerel striped tom and ashy-gray tom standing beside her. The trio looked at them with warm eyes, not hostile at all. Sedgestorm rose to his full height, Heronleap doing the same.

"Hello, Heronleap, Sedgestorm, Owlpaw," meowed Duckfrost, the darker brown tom with mackerel stripes, lowering his head.

"Greetings," replied Sedgestorm, and he dipped his head, Heronleap doing the same. The brown apprentice felt out of place as he awkwardly inclined his own head.

"How is MudClan?" asked Robinstar casually, her tail lashing behind her. Inquiry rose inside of Owlpaw, and from then on he meticulously watched the mottled gray she-cats actions.

"Fine," answered Heronleap, "and PineClan?"

Rainpad, the other tom with Robinstar, gave a swift response, "Good," His eyes were shadowed with consciousness and pain, and the tom scuffed his paw against the ground.

"We lost a warrior a quarter moon ago," murmured Robinstar, her eyes obscure, "Barktail."

All six of the cats there bowed their heads.

It was as if all borders disappeared once the illness had taken any of the cats in the Clans. The clouds growled above them, yet nobody looked up to see if the clouds were dark. Everyone was soberly standing, heads lowered, and they thought of Barktail. Especially Rainpad, who tried not to let his eyes burn and cry.

The borders seemed like imaginary kit lines in the sand as little droplets of liquid fell consequently from the dreary clouds above. Heronleap reached across the border with his tail and placed it gently on Rainpad's shoulder, who began to cry at the considerate touch from an opposing Clan.

Duckfrost led Rainpad away, and Robinstar looked up at the sky.

The mottled gray leader of PineClan uttered something in a soft, yet

at the same time grave tone and then left with her Clanmates with a swift movement.

# || chapter two

Owlpaw woke up. He opened his eyes, and he got up, arching his back. He opened his jaws as he stretched, and his jaws snapped closed. He flicked his tail, and swiftly groomed his fur of some pieces of moss clinging to his pelt.

Exiting the den, he thought that he saw a long-furred tortoiseshell. He blinked, and she did not disappear. He padded over to the medicine cat of MudClan. The medicine cat was normally out and about, searching for the one herb that would cure the raging sickness. She always came back late, with nothing that would heal it, and sleep minimally, to wake up and search again.

"Hazelberry," he greeted her, inclining his head. "How is everything?"

The medicine cat responded, "Fine. How are you?"

"As fine as I can be, right now," he answered.

"Stonestar told me that you'd be helping me look for herbs," she told him, tail flicking, "I wasn't sure if he had already let you know. But we'll be heading out very soon."

*Why would they choose me to go out?* He wondered, *I am just an apprentice. Maybe it's because I'm younger... And Hazelberry needs someone like that.*

Then, she padded off with a swish of her tail, calling over her shoulder to the apprentice. "I'll be waiting at the camp entrance."

As Stonestar exited his den and called the cats together, Owlpaw sighed, and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. In it lay two rabbits and a small, yet juicy mouse. He took the mouse and padded to Sedgestorm, flicking his tail invitingly.

The two soon finished the mouse. Sedgestorm dipped his head to

Owlpaw, who returned the gesture, and the apprentice turned to the camp entrance. He padded over to Hazelberry and the two cats exited the camp.

Breathing in the crisp, leaf-fall air of the plain-like territory, he glanced over at Hazelberry He inquired, "What are we looking for?"

"Anything," she replied, "I always look for any herbs. It is nearing the end of leaf-fall. We need as much herbs as possible, especially to cure minor illnesses. It'll help us in the end, if we can get rid of smaller sicknesses and try and deal with..."

She did not finish, and her eyes wandered away. The brown apprentice lashed his tail.

"How am I supposed to know what I'm looking for?"

Hazelberry snapped, "I just said, anything. Now go to the right, I'll go left."

Owlpaw turned sharply to the right, irritation bubbling inside him. *I thought she was going to be nicer! I'm not her apprentice; how am I supposed to know what certain herbs look like?*

He sniffed the air, critical golden eyes scouting the plains. *Rock, rock, rabbit...* He thought he spotted a tall, yellowish plant in the distance. He began to run towards it, his white paws thrumming across the ground. Wind rushed through his dark brown fur, and his ears lowered, being blown down by the strong gusts of the moor. Swerving around a few rocks, he approached the tall plant, that had bright yellow flowers. It grew right next to a rock.

Assuming it was an herb, he plucked a few stalks of it. He did not know the name of the herb, but to Hazelberry, that did not matter. A few pawsteps away, he spotted a plant with thin stems and white flowers.

He didn't know the name of this herb, either, but he got some nonetheless. Clamping the herbs in his mouth, he began to walk back to where the two had been. He gently opened his mouth a little bit, and he felt something slip back into his throat. He

coughed and the rest of the herbs fell from his mouth.

"Fox-dung," he cursed softly, lashing his tail. Nothing happened right away. *It's not poisonous, then.* Then, his stomach flipped upside down inside of him, and he blinked. The next moment, he vomited.

He spat, shaking his head. *That was yarrow,* he thought, his belly still tossing. Picking up the yarrow and the other herbs, he headed to where the two had been before they went their separate ways. As he arrived, he spotted Hazelberry already there, a green leafy herb and a few dried leaves laying at her paws.

"What took you so long?" she asked, then added, "Oh, lovely. More yarrow. And goldenrod."

He decided not to tell her about what happened. "Yeah," he meowed, "I found them. You asked for any herbs, remember?"

"I know that," she muttered, and directed him, "Pick up as many herbs as possible. I'll grab the remains of what you cannot carry. We've got some yarrow, goldenrod, burnet, plus some dried oak leaves. Be especially careful with the oak leaves. They crunch when they rip apart."

Owlpaw picked up all of the goldenrod, and some of the burnet. He was not holding the yarrow in his mouth after what happened last time. Hazelberry took the rest of the herbs and the two headed back to camp.

Finally, they arrived at camp. The sun slowly lowered in the sky, which was waving goodbye to its pale blue color and greeting orange streaks. Grasses below bent to the wind, who was excitedly racing over the plains of MudClan territory, swerving to avoid tall rocks.

Hazelberry meowed, "Follow me." She led Owlpaw into her den. He put down the herbs, and she dismissed him, telling him that he was allowed to eat something before he slept.

Owlpaw padded to the fresh-kill pile, which was surprisingly full. Sedgestorm and Heronleap lay on a flat rock, sharing a bird.

Flintpath and Meadowdapple passed a hare back and forth. The apprentice dragged a fat rabbit from the pile, leaving three more prey. He curled up near the pile and dug into the rabbit, his belly growling. He soon finished, nothing left but a few bones. He thanked StarClan for its life and he buried them. Then, as Stonestar exited his den and leaped atop the highrock. Seeing that all cats were gathered, he curled his tail over his paws and launched into a story.

On good days Stonestar would often call together the cats of MudClan and he would tell an inspiring story. Some days it was about a certain cats heritage, parents, or the way they acted. On other days he gave long monologues about somebody they all knew, or a huge symbol in their lives. Occasionally he would give them something to think about before they slept and then he'd send them off.

Today, he decided to focus on Owlpaw.

"Owlpaw is the last surviving apprentice in MudClan," Stonestar began, looking down at the tom. "He has worked very hard to survive along with the warriors, and I appreciate that."

The cats gathered took up a small cheer. "Owlpaw! Owlpaw!"

Inclining his head, Owlpaw felt his pelt grow warm. After the cheer faded away, Stonestar continued speaking.

"His parents - Briarsplash and Liontooth - both died due to the illness. They both were excellent members of the Clan, and Briarsplash brought upon two lovely litters of kits. One of which consisted of Sparrowfeather and his sister, Wrensong, both of which also succumbed to the illness. The other had Owlpaw. Owlkit, at the time, had no siblings. Briarsplash's litter only had one kit and she delivered it so."

"As a kit, Owlkit was quiet. If any of you here remember, he didn't speak very much. You wanted to become an apprentice and serve your Clan well. You were briefly interested in herbs for a short while, but that soon dissipated after Liontooth was injured while fighting. Owlkit, at the time, wanted to fight whoever had hurt his

father. The Clan name had never been released to the little kit, and still I expect the same now. Of course, Liontooth was healed, but you always thought he limped a little bit."

"Owlpaw became an apprentice. You continue to perform well under Sedgestorm's training and I hope we can see you turn into an excelling warrior of MudClan, in a world without sickness haunting us."

The apprentice staggered into the apprentice's den, and he sat in his nest. Thoughts crowded his mind but he forced them away. Stonestar just told the Clan, in summary, his life story. Everything that had happened to him. Everything. He forced himself to lower his head, his ears flattening.

Then, Owlpaw fell asleep.

# || chapter three

Owlpaw woke up. Blinking, he found himself watching the MudClan camp from above. He strode through the entrance, golden eyes brewing a confused storm, and nobody noticed him.

"What in StarClan's name is going on?" he asked, but nobody came out of the dens. Nobody answered. Shuffling his paws curiously, he glanced around with perplexed golden eyes. The wind whistled by him, carrying whispers that the grasses of the hills enjoyed hearing the gossips of each Clan.

He wandered around camp, not daring to look into any of the dens. If everyone was just asleep and hadn't heard him, cats would've been very upset to be woken by a curious apprentice. Boring of pacing the camp, he sat down near the entrance, his tail curling over his paws. Maybe something would happen now, perhaps something he'd missed before.

Then, a voice. "Sparrowfeather!"

A dark gray tom exited the warrior's den, and he flicked his tail, heading over to the gray-and-white she-cat who had called his name. He purred, nuzzling her, and the she-cat returned the favor graciously.

"I was told we needed to go on patrol," the she-cat meowed, her voice slightly scratchy - from coughing, it seemed, "Liontooth would've come, but he was concerned about Briarsplash. He said that Hazelberry mentioned about Briarsplash's kit is getting a little restless."

"Really? Oh, I'm going to have a younger sibling!" The tom named Sparrowfeather exclaimed excitedly.

"I already have a younger sibling," the she-cat purred.

Sparrowfeather rolled his eyes, amusement flickering in his eyes,

and he coughed briefly. "I wasn't talking about you, Wrensong. Now we better be going on that patrol, otherwise, Liontooth will be shouting at us that he would've rather gone instead 'those two lazy furballs'!"

The two siblings padded to the camp entrance. They both seemed to glance in Owlpaw's direction, but they continued on and left, tails flicking excitedly and coughs echoing from the two.

Owlpaw's golden eyes trailed after them as the left. He nearly leaped up and raced after the twosome. Those were his siblings... The two cats he'd always wished he'd met, he finally just saw. No, he did not speak to him, but he saw them. He saw them!

The very next moment he seemed to grow tired. He slumped against the ground, his eyes closing. Darkness engulfed him as he seemed locked away, unable to do anything. Then, he awoke again, but now he lay in the medicine cat's den.

*Mouse-dung. What happened?*

He got up, inquiry rushing through him, but no hot pain flashed through him like he thought would've happened. No aches jumped at him, and he felt okay. Though the air smelled sickly, and the overwhelming scent of lavender surrounded him. It wreathed around him until he finally noticed an underlying smell of death.

*No, no, no! StarClan, why are you showing me this?*

He already heard coughing echoing around him. He flicked his tail nervously and turned his head to spot two cats sitting in nests. One had a gray-and-white pelt and the other a dark gray.

"Sparrowfeather, Wrensong...!" he whispered, staggering to them and looking them both in the eyes. Neither answered.

The apprentice sat down near them. "Oh, no... No!" Sparrowfeather coughed again, his body shaking. "Sparrowfeather, no! Wrensong, no, no!"

Wrensong seemed to look weaker and weaker by the moment. Her breathing grew quicker and more ragged. She was in pain, her

breathing wheezy and strangled sounding. Wrensong's eyes grew horrified briefly, and then contented and joyful. She reached weakly forwards, nuzzling Owlpaw, and her head fell to the ground with a thump.

"Wrensong!"

Owlpaw wailed, his golden eyes wide with distress. "Wrensong, no! Wrensong! Wrensong!"

He stopped as Sparrowfeather turned his head to see his sister. He nudged her, murmuring something scratchily, but she didn't move. His ears flattened and he nudged her again, more harshly.

"No..." he whispered, blinking over and over again.

Owlpaw watched as his brother grew troubled as he finally realized he would never see his sister bounce around again. Never smell her fresh scent in the nest next to his, never speak to her again, never hear her voice drifting from the camp to his ears. Never race with her across the plains, never compete for the most prey and win or lose.

Sparrowfeather lay his head on his paws, squeezing his eyes shut swiftly. Clenching his jaw, he refused to let the droplets of anguish fall from his eyes. It didn't work.

After a while, Owlpaw felt himself drifting away slowly like something was taking him over. He jerked his head up and he looked at Sparrowfeather, who had a similar look in his eyes that Wrensong had a few hours ago.

Staring at his brother, he observed his flanks rising slower and slower by the moment. *Oh no...*

Sparrowfeather's eyes sparked brightly for a moment. He murmured, "Oh..." and stared Owlpaw in the eyes. The dark gray tom's eyes grew dull again, the flame of luminescence from before gone. Sparrowfeather gently put his paw on top of Owlpaw's, and then it pulled back, his eyes closing.

"Sparrowfeather..."

Owlpaw looked at both of his siblings, who had moved on. He got up, his face wet. Shaking out his fur, he turned around to leave. His siblings just died in front of his two golden eyes. The only thing he wondered - briefly, for he was unable to answer it - was why?

But he heard a noise behind him. Turning around, he saw starry shapes of two cats.

"Wrensong? Sparrowfeather?"

They both smiled. "Yes, Owlpaw." Wrensong meowed, and Sparrowfeather added;

"It's us."

"Oh...! I, I..." Owlpaw exclaimed, running up to the twosome. Emotions quickly leaped up inside of the apprentice, his golden eyes wide and bright at the prospect of talking to his siblings. But, the very next second, they disappeared. "W-what?"

Then, he was suddenly flashed through so many things. A she-cat howling flashed through his vision, and a small purr rose from behind him. He could not speak nor move. Then, he was thrown around again, swallowed up by darkness. Stoniness surrounded him, and he heard coughing. Not again. The noise faded away, and it was replaced by many imprecise voices, yet some held traces of ambition. He tried to open his eyes when everything seemed to grow slower, and slower until it all ceased and he lay still.

Befuddled, he opened his golden eyes. He was in the apprentice's den in MudClan's camp.

*What?*

He got up, and he licked his chest fur self consciously. What had just happened? Why would StarClan show him this? Especially now? Did this have to do with what Stonestar had told the Clan last night? What message were they trying to get across to him?

*Well, StarClan, whatever you are trying to show me, I don't understand.*

He thought, briefly irritated, hoping that they heard him. Maybe it

was just letting him know how his siblings came to an end. He never thought StarClan would've shown him that.

*They were just showing me what happened to my siblings. They were mentioned last night in Stonestar's speech, along with my parents, so StarClan found it fit to show me them.*

He felt agitated. He just watched his siblings die in front of him and he couldn't do anything about them. Nothing at all. They both had spoken to him, but before he could say anything truly meaningful to them they had disappeared.

Why would they show him them dying, talking to him, and then take them away from him? He was just close enough to have brushed their fur when they... they just seemed to disappear.He swallowed, blinking his glittering golden eyes.

*I must be strong for my Clanmates.* The thought echoed in his head.

*For Sparrowfeather and Wrensong.*

# || chapter four

Owlpaw padded out of the apprentice's den, tail flicking absently behind him.

Swiftly observing the camp, he noticed that hardly anyone was awake yet. He instinctively looked up at the sky to see it turning dawn. Pink and orange smeared across the dark blue sky, which was slowly changing. The moon gradually lowered into the sky. The rose-peach color decided it was done with patiently waiting. It passionately smashed its way to the darker sky, and eventually above his head lay a soft blue blanket.

The gray tom everyone knew as Stonestar exited his den, his ear flicking as he spotted the brown apprentice already awake. The apprentice looked up and he inclined his head.

"Why are you up so early?" queried Stonestar, leaping on top of the highrock.

The brown-furred apprentice scuffed his paw against the ground. "I dreamed and wasn't able to go back asleep." He meowed, voice slurred briefly and wording of the sentence off.

"Dreamed...?" Stonestar jumped promptly off the highrock and stood in front of Owlpaw, his gaze seeming to peer into the apprentice's soul. "About what? Did StarClan send you a sign?"

*This is what I was afraid of.*

He answered, "I... It wasn't from StarClan."

"Are you sure?" The leader looked unsure of the apprentice's response.

"It was not from StarClan," repeated the apprentice more firmly, to which the gray tom turned around with a swish of his fluffy gray tail.

Stonestar meowed, "If you wish, you may go hunting now, Owlpaw." The leader launched himself back onto the highrock. He seemed tired and irritated, and he went back into his den.

Owlpaw turned around, his tail swishing. He headed to the camp entrance, glancing over his shoulder, almost hoping that some cat would be awake. Nothing even moved. Perhaps he could find some prey for the Clan and come back when everyone was waking.

The apprentice exited the camp, whiskers twitching. He scented the faint scent of hare, and perking his ears, he followed the smell. He crouched against the ground, following the smell closely. Curving around a tall, pointy rock, he thought he spotted the light brown creature scuffling around near another rock. Golden gaze darting around, he recognized the border of SquirrelClan and flicked his tail. He hadn't realized he had come so far to even reach over here.

He thought he spotted someone across the border and felt curiosity leap up inside of him. Who could possibly be out this early, unless the journey to this border just felt strangely short? First, he reasoned, that he could at least catch this hare.

With a flattening of his ears, he narrowed his golden eyes, studying the rabbit. He noticed it seemed preoccupied with something at the base of the rock, and he crept forwards, his belly a mouse tail from the ground.

The MudClan apprentice approached the hare carefully, his paws light on the ground. Then, he launched himself at the rabbit. He missed, and his golden eyes widened as he tumbled straight into the rock.

The pointy rock stabbed him on the paw, and he screeched in agony. Then, he watched helplessly as the hare darted off - straight towards the figure past the SquirrelClan border.

The SquirrelClan cat seemed to be aware of what was going on, and they simply slammed their paw down on the hare as it ran straight into their paws after it had fled from Owlpaw.

Owlpaw staggered up, limping over to the cat. The SquirrelClan cat

was one he recognized immediately; Whitepaw, a classical calico she-cat. She is lean but strong, he knew, so he knew not to pick a fight with her. He wondered when she would be receiving her warrior name, for he thought that it would be soon. The two had met briefly at Gatherings, for ever since PetalClan's last apprentice had died, the two apprentices had been close.

"Hello," he inclined his head briefly.

Whitepaw looked at him curiously with a green gaze, "Why so close to the border, Owlpaw? And so alone, at a time so early?"

"Stonestar sent me out," he answered, as she coughed. He stumbled backwards as she seemed to be overtaken by a coughing spell for a moment. He looked at the rabbit, and returned his golden gaze to her.

"Excuse me," she rasped, shaking her head, "I.. I..."

Sympathetically, he flicked an ear at the calico apprentice. "It's okay, Whitepaw."

She coughed a little bit and she shook her head again. "Well, I'll -" she paused to cough again, "Goodbye," she ended the conversation swiftly and she lurched away with difficulty. He heard voices after she disappeared, and he recognized one of the warrior's voices. That didn't matter to him, though. A thought pricked at him.

Whitepaw was ill?

The calico apprentice had always been careful of her Clan's illness, and he was pretty sure that SquirrelClan had almost eliminated the worst of the sickness from their Clan. He scented the air for prey, and caught the scent of another hare, or he thought so, and he began to head over unsteadily to where it was, his paw throbbing. But the thought that he had seen Whitepaw nearly choking on her cough was horrific. The only other apprentice in the other Clans was terribly sick and he could do nothing about it.

He spotted the rabbit around where he had smashed his paw against the rock, and he flexed it instinctively. Shaking his head to

try and clear the thoughts of the sick apprentice, he crept to the hare, ears flattening. He leaped for it, claws unsheathed, and one claw snagged the rabbit.

The hare let out a shrill yelp. He clamped his jaws over it and ended it swiftly, and warm, sticky blood rushed into his mouth. A shudder traveling down his spine, he picked it up in his mouth, which was stained with crimson blood.

*A messy kill,* he thought to himself.

Owlpaw started to head back to camp, and the thoughts from earlier swarmed his mind again.

If Whitepaw was ill, and she... was gone, then he would be the only apprentice in the entirety of the Clans. The thought made him horrified, as he was quite good friends with her. The she-cats calico pelt was always clean and shiny, her eyes bright and excited... He quickly brushed it off and wondered how SquirrelClan would cope, losing their last apprentice.

This escalated into how *his* Clan would cope losing *him*. If they turned against StarClan because of it, which he prayed would not happen, he could not bear it. If he was taken for reasons only his ancestors knew, maybe then he would be content, finally speaking to his siblings. His paw throbbed, but he could barely even feel it, his mind swirling with thoughts.

He entered with a swish of his tail, concealing his feelings as he dropped the messily killed hare in the prey pile. He spotted Stonestar laying on top of the highrock. The gray tom called down;

"Nice catch!"

He wondered how to reply to that. Clearly Stonestar was only complimenting him because the apprentice had got up so early and had actually found something, because it was not a cleanly made kill. With a swish of his tail, he knew he had to respond soon, for he did not want to be considered as ignoring a friendly remark, especially from the leader.

Owlpaw answered, "Thanks," but said nothing more as he curled at the edge of his den. He curled his tail over his white paws, and he closed his golden eyes. He laid his head on his paws, his ears flattening against the wind that waltzed through the camp. All of earlier's events seemed to slip away as the darkness blanket fell upon him.

# || chapter five

Owlpaw thrashed around in his sleep, watching Whitepaw suffer in front of him. She gave another violent cough, her eyes fluttering. Then, as she tried to walk, she staggered and fell to the ground with a soft thump.

"Whitepaw!" he yowled, desperately trying to claw his way to her. Suddenly, he sat up with a start. His fur was warm and his golden eyes were wide with horror. Whipping around, his gaze scanning the den, he spotted a wavering shape of a cat.

He screamed again, "Whitepaw!" And he clambered to the calico shape. Unfortunately for the distressed apprentice, the shape dissipated as soon as it had appeared. At that moment, a very irritated Flintpath entered the apprentice's den.

"Cut it out!" he hissed, "What's up with Whitepaw, anyways?" His eyes narrowed at the apprentice, shadowed.

Since the warrior had been rude to him, the apprentice snapped, "None of your business. What's wrong, anyways? Something seems... off."

Flintpath lowered his head and beckoned him with his tail. Unsteadily standing up, the dark brown tom followed the gray-and-white tabby. He lead him out into the camp, where a stiff-legged Stonestar stood in the middle, tail lashing.

"Stonestar? What's going on?" The apprentice queried, and the gray tom's head turned sharply.

As Owlpaw padded over to his leader, he noticed his leader's nervous movements, like his shadowy eyes, his ears flattened, and his overall ruffled appearance.

"Meadowdapple and Heronleap decided it'd be an excellent idea to have kits," he growled to himself.

The apprentice staggered on his paws. He sensed the sarcasm in the leader's tone, but he also caught an undertone of optimism. He was incredulous of why the twosome had decided to have kits, but he wanted to know where they were now.

"Where are they now?" he questioned.

"Meadowdapple had hidden her pregnant belly for so long and nobody noticed. Not even Heronleap. She's been pretty stagnant lately too, of which I dismissed, for I thought she was ill. And she is. The birth will surely last all day, perhaps most of the night. Hazelberry told me to leave the work to her." Then, lifting his head, he murmured, "Do not enter the medicine cat's den. StarClan forbid it, however, hopefully they permit this to go well..." Stonestar did not finish.

"Wha...?"

The words that his leader had just spoken almost just slipped Owlpaw's mind. Flintpath quickly ushered the apprentice out of camp as Meadowdapple's cough drifted from Hazelberry's den.

"Flintpath, why did they have kits now? Meadowdapple is sick-!"

As soon as they were out of camp, the gray and white tabby tom snarled at Owlpaw, who shrunk back, his eyes blinking at the cat who he thought he had known so well.

"Owlpaw, I could give less of a mouse-dung why they decided to have kits. But if Heronleap and Meadowdapple both get sick because of this, I will blame them. We will only have me and Sedgestorm as a warrior and you are the only apprentice. Stonestar will surely make you a warrior, however, then we will only be three strong. I... I don't know."

Then, Flintpath asserted, "Go hunting and come back right at sundown."

"Yes, Flintpath." he murmured, and he padded away, thoughts swirling in his head.

*Why would he be so offensive about this situation?* he wondered, *I*

*thought Flintpath would be a little bit happy that they were having kits?*

As if a rock had slammed abruptly into his head, he realized that his past mate had died before the two could've ever had kits. He felt a rush of grief for the older warrior, but the way the white-and-gray tom had spoken to him flicked into his mind.

*But why would they have kits? I thought that they were just friends, perhaps mates, but nothing more than that... And I never thought they would go this far!*

Then, he shook his head.

*I need to hunt*, he reminded himself, his ears pricking. Scenting the air, he thought he picked up the smell of a mouthwatering piece of prey.

He had completely forgotten about the events of that morning.

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The sun sat on the horizon. It had grown tired from its journey across the leaf-fall sky, and now that it was dissipating, the sky followed. The sky turned pinkish orange, and the blue was dissolving away.

Owlpaw entered the camp with a rabbit hanging from his jaws and a small mouse hooked on his claw. His golden eyes wondering where everyone was, he headed to the medicine cat's den. He paused in front of it, lowering his head slightly as he recalled Flintpath's harsh words.

Then, he dropped the delectable rabbit at the entrance to the den and he sighed. He headed over to the fresh-kill pile and he sat down to the left of it. He unhooked the little mouse from his sharp claw, ignoring the blood stained on his paw, and he bit into it. The flavors spread quickly in his mouth, but he couldn't taste it. What had happened to Meadowdapple and her kits?

He left a couple bites left and realized he hadn't caught enough for all of his Clanmates. If he had gotten one more piece, Sedgestorm and Flintpath could've had something. Then he remembered

Stonestar also needed to eat. He quickly thought up that someone else had caught something for him, and he remembered Hazelberry, too...

Feeling guilty, he sat outside of the apprentice's den, the sun slipping beneath the horizon as the sky turned colors. He wondered how the birthing was going, for he did not hear anything. Then, voices murmured inside of the medicine cat's den.

He crept over, sitting outside of the den. He needed to know what was going on with Meadowdapple and her kits. He pricked an ear, hoping he was blending well with the shadows. Being caught eavesdropping would be a horrid thing, especially now. Surely Stonestar wouldn't punish him? He needed as many apprentices and warriors working for the Clan as possible, especially now. Then, he heard voices speaking.

"This doesn't seem right..." a voice whispered. It sounded like Stonestar.

A more feminine voice answered, "No, it doesn't. You're right. Fetch me some herbs, the ones that look sort of... Yes, those." Then, after a brief pause, came a horrified, "Oh, my-!"

She was cut off abruptly, for a clipped breath interrupted her.

"Oh, StarClan... The sickness must've been too much for her to handle during the birthing..." the medicine cat whispered, and Owlpaw could almost see the she-cat's head lowering in grief.

"Her body isn't doing what it was a moment ago..." the tom uttered.

Hazelberry replied, "She's gone. Now I need to finish the job for her."

"But... Shouldn't her body still be working to help the kits? Even if she's..." the one who spoke first did not finish.

After a pause, a voice spoke, "She doesn't look alive, does she? Her kits will be the only thing left of her." Her voice faltered slightly. "Don't tell anyone but Heronleap. We mustn't cause panic among our Clanmates. We will tell them sickness took her. Now, all we can

hope for is the kits to make it."

# || chapter six

Owlpaw slipped away from the medicine cat's den, his golden eyes blinking and mind swirling.

*Meadowdapple is gone,* he thought, *And... Now, who to care for the kits?*

Then, he felt a jolt hit him.

*Hazelberry is going to have to take care of them.*

There was no other she-cat in the Clan, and he was sure that Stonestar was not going to ask the other Clans for help. They would not bother with a couple of kits, who might die in the end. He shivered, wondering what happen to the future of the Clan, now with some kits to care for. More mouths to feed is not a good thing, especially during leaf-fall, and with this sickness going around.

The apprentice sat outside of his den, wondering if the kits inside of the medicine cat den would ever reach apprenticeship.

He watched as Hazelberry exited the medicine cat's den.

"Hazelberry!" he exclaimed, and leaped up, racing towards her. He felt dread creep up on him, and he pretended to act confused. "Where is Meadowdapple?"

She paused, ears flattened. "Meadowdapple... is gone."

Real confusion swathed Owlpaw. He thought that they were going to keep that secret? Perhaps Hazelberry hadn't expected questions that soon? He stopped himself swiftly.

"I... I suppose you are to take care of them...?"

Then, Hazelberry turned away, and Stonestar exited the medicine cat's den. His ears were lowered, and the apprentice spotted that he was struggling to keep his fur flat. The plain gray tom launched

himself onto the highrock, and he sat quickly, his tail curling around his paws.

Most of the Clan had gathered already, but he called his Clanmates together regardless. Flintpath had been exiting the den, and Heronleap soon followed him. The two cats sat near each other, Sedgestorm sat near Hazelberry, and Owlpaw sat alone.

"As you know, Meadowdapple and Heronleap recently had kits. Meadowdapple was not able to make it through the kitting."

Heronleap let out a long, sad, yowl for his mate. The apprentice looked over at them, and he spotted Flintpath gently placing his tail on Heronleap's shoulder. Closing his golden eyes, he wondered how the world would be different if Meadowdapple were here right now.

"We mourn her death greatly. We will miss her, but now we must make a different decision."

Owlpaw's eyes flew open and he looked sharply up at Stonestar.

The leader paused but beckoned Hazelberry and Heronleap up to the highrock. Sedgestorm, now sitting alone, got up and went over to his apprentice, sitting down.

"Heronleap, I hope you understand that this... this kitting that you have caused... has caused us to lose our last female warrior, which has also caused us to lose a number. We have lost a mouth to feed, but thanks to Hazelberry, we now have two more to feed. Moreover, we do have two kits that need a mother. Therefore, I ask you, Hazelberry to care for these kits."

The medicine cat dipped her head to Heronleap, whose eyes were shining with pleading. The dark brown apprentice could see he wanted her to take care of them.

"Stonestar... I... Must accept this offer. However," she added right away, "if these kits get in the way of anything of my ranking in this Clan, I will immediately go back."

The plain gray tom flicked his whiskers, concealing his surprise. He inclined his head, and he meowed to Flintpath,

"Get the kits."

The white-and-gray tom stood up and turned around quickly. He headed into the medicine cat's den, and he disappeared into the shadows. After a moment, he reappeared with two kits dangling from his mouth. He padded to the center of the camp, and he dropped them there. He quickly returned to the position that he had been had been a moment ago.

"What are their names, Clanmates?" Stonestar queried.

Sedgestorm questioned, "Is one a female?" Hazelberry headed over to the two kits and flicked her tail as she looked up.

"They are both males," she told him.

Sedgestorm nodded. "I believe that Heronleap can name one," he offered the tom.

Heronleap dipped his head to the warrior. He looked up at the dark sky, now turned black as the moon hung in the sky. Stars speckled the blanket of darkness, and the warrior closed his eyes momentarily.

He opened them again, and he looked back down at his Clanmates.

"His," the warrior pointed at the white tom with black paws, "Name will be Ashkit."

Owlpaw flicked his tail, and he studied the other kit. He was light brown, with lighter, jagged splotches all over him. He was wriggling around, accidentally smashing into Ashkit several times. He appeared to be heading to where the majority of the cats sat.

"So?" prompted Stonestar.

Flintpath called out, "How about Aspenkit?"

It was dismissed right away by Hazelberry, to which the white-and-gray tabby sighed.

"Sagekit? Sorrelkit?" Hazelberry suggested.

Stonestar shook his head. "I like Willowkit,"

"No," Flintpath argued, "Blossomkit is nice."

"I don't like any of those names!" Heronleap exclaimed. "What about Briarkit or Acornkit?"

Flintpath, Stonestar, Heronleap, and Hazelberry argued like this for a little while. One would suggest a name, only to immediately be shot down by another who disliked it. However, Sedgestorm and Owlpaw did not suggest any names out loud. The two were discussing quietly over names.

"I think," Sedgestorm had to raise his voice over the rest of his Clanmates, "that Owlpaw has a good name idea. He is the next youngest, after all."

All heads turned to the apprentice. Heronleap's eyes were shadowy, however, Flintpath's were bright and defiant. Hazelberry's were concealed, as were Stonestar's.

At first, Owlpaw didn't want to say the name. He shouldn't have to name a kit... What if he changed the kit's entire future by this one name? And what if this kit figured out that he was named by a mere apprentice?

Sedgestorm gave the dark brown tom a gentle, but firm, nudge. "Go on, Owlpaw," he murmured to his apprentice.

"I think Maplekit is good."

Then, before anyone could react, Sedgestorm nodded, leaping up and swishing his tail.

"Excellent. We've named them both. Ashkit and Maplekit will sleep with Hazelberry for tonight, and perhaps they will sleep with the warriors in the following nights to keep warm."

The warrior ushered Owlpaw into the apprentice's den.

"Thank you, Sedgestorm..." he looked up at his mentor, his golden eyes bright.

The warrior gently touched his nose to Owlpaw's. "I know that you just want a good life in this Clan... I'm not sure if these kits will be helping, for that means we have more mouths to feed... But I don't know if they will even live to their second moon."

Owlpaw looked up at Sedgestorm. "How do you know that? I can hunt extra hard for them and the Clan, and everyone will get fed. The kits will live for as long as StarClan allows them."

The warrior laughed softly, "Sometimes it doesn't matter how much you hunt for the Clan, or how strongly you fight against invaders. Sometimes, the will of StarClan powers over all."

Owlpaw's golden eyes swirled with confusion.

Sedgestorm shook his head. "Goodnight, Owlpaw."

"Goodnight, Sedgestorm."

# || chapter seven

Beechstrike, a creamy, broad-shouldered tom, crept slowly through the undergrowth, his tail flicking as he scented the air. He caught a whiff of who he was looking for.

He sprung out. "Juniperstar, this is all wrong!"

The leader - Juniperstar - whipped around. She murmured "I know it is..." and then shook herself. "Come, Beechstrike. I have something to show you."

The she-cat quickly disappeared into the bracken, her fur getting scraped by the thorns. The warrior wove after her, swerving to avoid trees. He got stuck in a bramble, but pulled away, his broad shoulders making it difficult to get through. In front of him, he watched Juniperstar come into a clearing. He burst into it, shaking out his fur. In the clearing were three other cats.

"Pigeonear, Icespeckle, Coaldawn," Juniperstar greeted the three cats and one of them looked at her sharply. It was a smoky dark tom.

He hissed, "Why is Beechstrike here? I told you to come alone!"

A gray-and-white splotched she-cat nudged Coaldawn. "Chill out,"

"Yeah," an icy white she-cat added - probably Icespeckle. "But why is he here? This is classified information," she pointed out, sitting down primly and curling her tail over her dark gray paws.

Juniperstar was unfazed by the hostility. "Beechstrike, like myself, is curious about what will occur next." She told them simply, motioning for the creamy tom to sit, and he nodded at the leader's words.

"So," Pigeonear began, "What Meadowdapple and Heronleap have done has messed everything up. Maplekit and Ashkit, however, are

not to blame. Their parent's actions have cost them, and that's why Meadowdapple is not with her Clanmates. It was hard to take MudClan's last female warrior, but we cannot let actions like that pass without a punishment."

Icespeckle glanced curiously at Pigeonear. "But what about the other-!" Coaldawn had swished his dark tail swiftly over the she-cat's muzzle, cutting her off.

"I will take that up," Coaldawn glared at Icespeckle, and leaned over to her. He whispered something in her ear, and the icy white she-cat nodded. Coaldawn now spoke to the group, "The two kits that Hazelberry are taking care of are not in good condition. We can only do so much to make sure they get the milk they need - from Hazelberry - and a medicine cat is not really... well... supposed to feed kits. They're not meant for it. Hazelberry can have herbs that help with that, but since we are almost into leaf-bare, there's not much herbs can do."

Icespeckle quickly cut in. "The kits are in the way of the other thing," she glanced daggers at Coaldawn, "And there's only one thing that can help with that."

Juniperstar nodded. "This news will be taken to Doestar and the others. Come, Beechstrike."

In a second, the two had disappeared into the bushes.

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Owlpaw woke up, and he shivered. A cold drift had entered the apprentice's den, and he knew that leaf-bare couldn't be too far off.

That meant the kits would be in danger of freezing. And that also meant that prey would be slowly disappearing, and it would start snowing again. The white crystals that fell from the sky also made sure that prey would be deep in their burrows.

The apprentice got up, shaking out his fur and exiting the den. Above his head was a leaf-bare sky; pale gray, no clouds, and endlessly stretching out. The dark brown tom noticed the almost-full moon fading away in the sky. Its friends - the stars - had already left and were waiting for the moon to hurry up.

His Clanmates had already gotten up, he observed. There was three pieces of prey in the pile, two of which looked freshly, and cleanly, caught. He guessed that Sedgestorm, maybe Flintpath, had gone out and decided to hunt. He looked around the camp, hoping to snag a piece of prey and share it with someone.

However, the only cats in the camp were Hazelberry, who he knew was in the medicine cat's den, Stonestar, who was probably hidden away in his den, and Heronleap, who was likely making sure his kits were okay. He suspected that Sedgestorm and Flintpath had gone out together to hunt and mark borders and possibly do some hunting as well.

With a growl of irritation, Owlpaw headed over to the fresh-kill pile and snatched a moorhen. He wondered where it came from, since the waterbirds preferred to be around marshy areas. He guessed it was caught near PetalClan. He padded over to the warriors den, and he scented the air, a whiff of Heronleap's smell drifting to him.

The apprentice entered, dropping the moorhen, and meowing, "Hi, Heronleap. I thought we could share this," he offered.

"Sure," The tom looked up, licking his chest fur self-consciously, and he took a bite of the bird, licking his jaws. He took another and pushed the piece of prey to Owlpaw. "You finish it," he offered, curling up and laying his head on his paws.

Shrugging, the apprentice dragged the moorhen out of the den, releasing his grip on the prey a little. He sat down near the apprentice's den, easily devouring the moorhen. Licking his jaws, he felt like he needed to go do something. He preferred to help his Clan over lazing around all day, and then he wondered how elders felt. Then, he remembered; there was no elders anymore.

Sighing, he got up and spotted his mentor at the entrance to the

camp. Sedgestorm flicked his tail as Flintpath followed him, dragging a piece of prey.

"Fighting training." Sedgestorm asserted. Have you eaten yet?"

The apprentice nodded, padding over to his mentor. The flavors of the prey lingered monetarily in his mouth at the mention of delicious food.

"Race you?" Sedgestorm queried, whiskers flicking.

"You're on!" Owlpaw exclaimed.

The two raced out of camp. The grasses behind them whipped around, and dust threw up in storms behind them.

# || chapter eight

"I won!"

Owlpaw screeched, skidding to a stop as Sedgestorm's voice sounded behind him.

"As if!" The apprentice felt something crush him, and he looked up to see Sedgestorm. "Battle training today!"

The dark brown tom lashed his tail, narrowing his eyes.

Owlpaw arched his back, throwing Sedgestorm off. He leaped up, whipping around to see his mentor growling, his fur raised.

"Seems as if we're going to have a little pre-battle," the warrior purred.

"Indeed," Owlpaw narrowed his eyes at Sedgestorm, taking in his surroundings. A rock to Sedgestorm's left, a bush nearby somewhere... He wasn't able to look at the rest, for his mentor had jumped towards him.

Sedgestorm started to run towards the apprentice, but the tom knew better. Owlpaw skirted away from his mentor, picking up the pace and running around the older tom. Quickly recalling training, he remembered a move named half-turn belly rake. He swiftly saved that for later.

The warrior whipped around, a bright light shimmering in his eyes, as he bolted towards his apprentice. The smaller tom wasn't able to move quick enough and Sedgestorm performed they had learned last time; forepaw slash. He, with sheathed claws, brought his paw down on Owlpaw's head. With a hiss, the apprentice jerked back. He ducked and rolled away from his mentor, leaping up.

With a very quick surveying of his surroundings, Owlpaw recalled that rock was nearby. The apprentice ran around the rock,

crouching behind it. He peeked out from the left side; there was Sedgestorm, turning around and beginning to run towards the rock. With an explosive screech, Owlpaw sprung over the rock, landing on Sedgestorm and he pinned him down.

"Are you done yet?" Sedgestorm asked, smirking and flipping his apprentice over, who was breathing heavily under the warrior's weight.

With a faintly irritated eye roll, Owlpaw shook his head. "Don't think so."

Growling, Owlpaw arched his back to throw the warrior off. But his mentor held his ground, firmly planting him against the ground. Looking up at the older tom, he flicked his whiskers, wondering how he could out. He probably didn't have enough strength to roll under Sedgestorm and away from him. He probably couldn't do the play dead move; it was so overused and everyone knew you just don't go limp and expect to get free.

I'm stuck... Owlpaw realized.

Sedgestorm smiled. "Is it over by default?" He queried.

With a resigned sigh, the apprentice nodded. His mentor got off Owlpaw, almost defensive as if he expected him to start up the mock battle again.

"Today we'll learn two moves. The first one is called upright lock," Sedgestorm began, flicking his tail. "Do you notice anything different about this area?"

Owlpaw surveyed the area - again. He noticed rocks, some taller objects and things that you can hide around. Perhaps jump off of. "There's rocks and a lot of things you can hide around and jump off."

"Good! That will pertain to the next move." Sedgestorm nodded. "This is a complicated, final move on a previously weakened enemy. If you had used a stronger move a little while ago, maybe scruff shake on a smaller opponent, this one would finish them off

completely. It's good to use on a smaller cat, like yourself. Or, a smaller enemy can use this on a well-sized cat with extreme strength and speed."

"The cat performing this move must first rear up on their back legs and bring their weight down on the other cat. This will momentarily stun them, possibly. Then, you finish them off with simply pinning them down. However, if the other opponent tries to do a move similar to this, you need to wrestle them and flip them underneath you. Got it?"

With a blink, Owlpaw nodded. That was a lot to take in.

So I'm supposed to crush a warrior and then keep him there?

He wondered, and Sedgestorm nudged his apprentice, "Ready to go? We've still got another move to learn!"

Owlpaw closed his golden eyes, and he opened them again, nodding, "Yes."

"I'll do it on you first," Sedgestorm offered, "so you can see how it's done."

The warrior came over to Owlpaw, rearing up on his hind legs. He looked very tall and the apprentice wondered if, in battle, he could speed off. He was a smaller cat - well, he was an apprentice - but he knew he probably could skirt off during battle.

Sedgestorm then crushed Owlpaw underneath him swiftly, pinning him with great strength.

"There. You try."

Owlpaw stood up after Sedgestorm had gotten off of him. He padded over to the stronger, bigger tom, and closed his golden eyes. He reared up on his hind legs and brought his weight down. He missed the tom and he landed on the ground with a thump.

"Try again," Sedgestorm urged his apprentice.

He tried again, attempting to crush the warrior. But he missed. He

padded back over, shaking out his fur and rearing up. He crushed his mentor this time, but not strong enough. The warrior easily threw his apprentice off. He walked over again, blinking at his mentor. Sedgestorm looked encouragingly at his apprentice.

He padded up to his mentor, closing his golden eyes. He reared up, feeling tall and able. He brought down all his weight, but he missed. He crushed the ground beneath his paws.

With an irritated swish of his tail, he stalked off angrily.

"I can't do it!"

Sedgestorm came racing after. "Wait! Owlpaw, come back!"

"No, Sedgestorm!" He hissed at his mentor, his neck fur bristled up angrily. "I can't do this stupid move, and you can see that. I won't be needing to fight anytime soon with this idiotic sickness going around! Everyone's going to die if StarClan doesn't do anything soon! It's the end of the Clans. Just like last time."

As Sedgestorm gave an almost confused look, Owlpaw continued, his eyes angrily shimmering.

"Remember those nursery stories about ThunderClan, RiverClan, WindClan, and ShadowClan? The elders talk about the great Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, who died by being crushed by a tree. Hazelberry told a story once of Bluestar, who gave up her kits to RiverClan so her Clan wouldn't be led by an evil cat called Thistleclaw. My mother told me once of Mistystar, one of those kits that Bluestar gave up, who went on to lead RiverClan, one of the longest living leaders. She also told me of Tallstar, a noble WindClan leader who lived through the journey, when the Clans moved away from their original homes to get away from twolegs.

"My father told me of Yellowfang and Cinderpelt, two medicine cats from ThunderClan. They were skilled in their art, he told me. He told me of Whitestorm, Firestar's loyal deputy until he died during the battle with Scrouge. My mother told me of Hollyleaf, a ThunderClan she-cat who was supposed to be part of a prophecy, but wasn't. She was replaced with Dovewing, a white she-cat. They

tell me of Ivypool, Dovewing's sister, who went to the Dark Forest. But she betrayed them in the end, staying loyal to ThunderClan."

"They tell me of Rowanstar, a powerful ShadowClan tom who lead his Clan well. Hazelberry told me of Tawnypelt, sister to Bramblestar of ThunderClan, daughter of Tigerstar, a crooked tom who wanted to rule all of the Clans. Tawnypelt left ThunderClan as an apprentice and she built her pride and loyalty to ShadowClan from the ground up. They tell of Blackstar, the predecessor of Rowanstar, a strong, fair tom who led for a long time."

"All the cats who are alive eventually die, but nobody knows how they died, and StarClan doesn't tell anyone, either. I doubt they just 'died off' like everyone says. I used to ask my parents, the elders, and Hazelberry when I was younger. I bet they died just like we are now. Or something like it. StarClan would be doing something by now if they really thought it was an issue. Apparently, two groups of cats from different time periods dying is just okay to them."

His mentor nearly staggered away, but he stood taller, and he stood in front of his apprentice, looking down at him. "Owlpaw, do not speak to me like that. Do not use StarClan's name in that way. We've talked about this before." He asserted firmly, his eyes dark. "One more time, please, and we can do the next move tomorrow."

Owlpaw whipped around, reared up, and brought all his weight down furiously. He missed. The tom crushed the ground beneath him, tearing up the grassy terrain.

"We can try again later." He said, his voice completely flat. "We've talked about StarClan and the sickness before, Owlpaw. And we've also talked about ThunderClan, RiverClan, ShadowClan, and WindClan, too. You are not to speak like that again to your mentor."

Sedgestorm padded off, tail lashing irritably.

Owlpaw stared after him, padding after him a moment later, a sigh escaping him.

# || chapter nine

Owlpaw woke up in his nest, shivering and freezing. The cold draft had returned again, curling around the apprentice and smiling at him. He shook out his fur, recalling the previous day's events. He smoothed down his chest fur, and he padded outside of the den.

It was just as cold outside as it was inside his den. The numbing air swirled around the camp and the pale blue sky above offered no help. The sun was bleak and dreary, shedding warmthless and dim light on the world below it.

The apprentice hated this. He wondered if it was truly considered leaf-bare yet. It was quite cold, and the Gathering was coming up quite soon. Glancing at the pale sky, he spotted a disappearing moon. It was close to being full. He guessed there were only a few days until the Gathering. He could see Whitepaw again!

Excited thoughts of the white calico reminded him of the last time he'd seen her. She'd been coughing, too much to even speak to him very well, and she went back to her camp without talking with him very much.

Glancing at the fresh-kill pile, he spotted a stale looking rabbit. And... nothing else. Sighing, he decided he'd go out and get some prey. He wasn't really sure if anyone else was awake, but soon the kits would be awake and Hazelberry would need prey to feed herself before the kits. Shaking his head, he exited the camp.

As he left, he lifted his head in the air, opening his mouth. He was rushed with scents; chilly, cold air, stale cat scent, old blood and prey scent... Quickly closing his mouth, he breathed in the fresh air, cleansing his senses of the many scents and smells. He followed one of the trails, a hare, and he guessed it had smelled the camp and came close. It had been quite close to the camp.

Then, Owlpaw stopped, spotting the rabbit near a small hole in the ground.

That's it's home... he realized, his eyes widening. So if I miss, it'll be gone.

He instantly fell into the hunter's crouch, making sure his tail wasn't flicking and his ears were pressed against his head. He stalked towards it slowly, careful not to alert it of his presence. The hare was looking down into the den, squeaking. Guessing that there was another hare inside, he waited until it stopped moving around.

Then the hare tried to get down into the hole.

Owlpaw made a break for the hare, sprinting forwards and leaping for it, his claws unsheathed. A snarl escaped him as the creature got away, hiding in the hole. The apprentice scored his claws where the rabbit had disappeared but nothing happened. Hissing in frustration, he scented the air again. Only a stale rabbit, the hare from before, and a mouse.

Deciding to try and catch the mouse, he followed the smell, and he came across a sharp looking rock. There was cat scent here, and the mouse smell was just gone. Faint blood scent also traced the air, and Owlpaw pricked his ears. The cat scent was fairly fresh, but not old.

He looked around, spotting some torn up patches of grass. Realizing he was near the border, he looked up right away, his eyes darting around. This was the PineClan border. Lashing his tail, he padded right up to the border.

Suddenly, a warrior padded out from the bushes.

The MudClan apprentice jumped backwards, his hackles instinctively raised. The she-cat flicked her whiskers.

"Hello, Owlpaw," she greeted him.

The apprentice didn't really recognize her, but he knew her name from various Gatherings.

"Hello, Troutfur," he mewed in return, politely inclining his head. He smelled mouse scent on her gray-blue fur, and his neck fur raised, bristling uncontrollably.

"What's wrong? Is.. is your Clan okay?" She asked curiously, noticing his fur.

"My Clan is fine," he growled, pushing away thoughts of the kits in his Clan. "But is yours? Do you have to steal prey from us in order to survive?"

Troutfur visibly flinched.

"We, um, I... Well, the prey crossed the border and I caught it!" She claimed, clearly looking for words to prove she didn't steal prey.

Owlpaw rolled his eyes. "That's a lie-"

"How do you know that?" She interrupted. "I have the mouse right here!" The cat disappeared for a moment and she returned a moment later, holding a mouse in her jaws. She dropped it in front of him. "See?"

He leaned forward, balancing carefully, and sniffed the mouse. MudClan, blood, and PineClan were the only scents he could smell on the mouse's pale brown fur. His fur threatened to bristle, but he forced it to lie flat.

Then, with a swift movement, Owlpaw yanked it across the border and clamped it firmly in his jaws.

"This is rightfully MudClan's prey!" He growled.

"Fine, you caught me!" The PineClan cat spat, her fur immediately on end. "If you don't tell your leader about this, I won't tell mine. If my leader finds out I was hunting on your territory, she'd kill me."

Her eyes were dark and narrowed, betraying no emotion - besides pure fury. The she-cat's voice was low and threatening. Owlpaw nodded, his eyes equally as dark and narrowed. But they did not portray submission or nervousness. They glittered with irritation, triumph, and flashed briefly with confusion.

He knew he had to tell. There was no way in StarClan's name that he couldn't keep it from Stonestar. It was important! PineClan was hunting on MudClan's territory! Owlpaw wasn't very sure if

Robinstar, PineClan's leader, knew about it. He guessed she probably did, and Troutfur was just lying about her finding out.

Owlpaw stalked off, Troutfur doing the same, and soon paused to wash the PineClan scent from his and the mouse's fur. He eventually wasn't able to detect the smell of the other Clan, and he continued on back to camp.

When he entered, nothing seemed to be happening. Flicking an ear, he padded to the fresh-kill pile, dropping the mouse. The rabbit from earlier was gone. He guessed Hazelberry was feeding the kits now, after eating the rabbit. But he was wrong.

Hazelberry left her den, her fur messy and unkempt, her eyes dull and glazed. She headed to the leader's den. Soft voices echoed inside, but they were inaudible. They both exited, and Stonestar jumped onto the highrock, Hazelberry sitting beneath it. Owlpaw wasn't even sure if anyone was in camp, but Stonestar yowled the familiar words anyway.

"Everyone please gather for a Clan meeting!"

# || chapter ten

Cold air swirled inside of MudClan's camp as Flintpath and Sedgestorm exited the warrior's den. Stonestar sat on top of the highrock, patiently waiting for his Clan to gather. Beneath him, Hazelberry hurriedly groomed her fur.

Owlpaw sat near the center of the clearing, his eyes glittering curiously. What could this be about? The answer pricked at the back of his mind, but he pushed it away, curling his tail over his paws. Flintpath and Sedgestorm sat near each other, heads lowered, whispering softly. They stopped a moment later, both returning their gazes to their leader.

"Where is Heronleap?" Stonestar queried.

As if a StarClan cat had told Heronleap he needed to be at camp, he padded into camp with two hares. Owlpaw knew they were the ones he tried to catch.

"I found him." Owlpaw muttered, quiet enough for only him to hear. Heronleap's eyes widened briefly, but he skirted to the prey pile, swiftly dropping his catches, and sitting down near the apprentice.

"Hazelberry would like to tell you all something." Stonestar mewed, standing up and stepping back. Hazelberry, lashing her tail, jumped onto the highrock. She didn't sit down, her tortoiseshell fur slightly raised.

"Ashkit and Maplekit are dead."

The numbing air that clung to the pelts of the MudClan cats seemed to grow colder and colder by the moment. The sky seemed to become drearier, a paler, warmthless blue, and it appeared that the sun just didn't want to shed useless light onto the camp anymore.

Dark, brooding clouds briefly skirted through the sky, spritzing the camp with little droplets of rain as the cats still were dead silent.

Not a word escaped anyone's mouth, however Heronleap's head was lowered and anyone could tell he was upset. Small, soft, and sad-sounding whimpers came from the tom.

"They caught the sickness and they couldn't.. couldn't... fight it... I don't know who's sick in the Clan, or who caught it, but whoever it is," her eyes narrowed. "You killed those kits."

"What?! You can't do that! That's not fair!" Owlpaw heard an outraged exclamation. Then, he realized, he had said it.

Hazelberry looked at him with sharp eyes, and Sedgestorm turned to the apprentice with disappointment glittering in his tired eyes.

"Whoever it was killed these kits!" She repeated, a hiss escaping her.

Owlpaw stood up, his fur bristling. This wasn't allowed.

"Hazelberry, I know you're-"

She cut him off furiously. "You are not a warrior! Do not speak like that to me! You are not allowed to talk as if you are equal to your elders!"

"Hazelberry," Stonestar warned.

"Yes, Stonestar?" She whipped around.

"You are not to speak to the only apprentice in the Clan like that. He has to survive like the rest of us. I know you're upset about the kits, but it isn't anyone's fault. Besides... well, I have another thing to talk about."

Sedgestorm stalked behind the crowd and pulled Owlpaw aside.

"That was unacceptable and unnecessary!" He hissed softly. "Although it wasn't necessary to blame the cat who's sick, you had no reason to do that-"

"But she cannot blame that cat!"

"Owlpaw!" The warrior glared daggers at him. "We will discuss this

later. That behavior was unacceptable. Go sit down. Now."

Owlpaw stalked back over, anger boiling in his body. It is unfair to blame someone who was sick for the death of the kits! Hazelberry should be blamed. She couldn't save them. She was the one taking care of them. The only one. *Maybe she was the one who got them sick.* He thought, and heard a distasteful hiss from Hazelberry.

*And now I'm was the one getting yelled at? I'm was the youngest in the Clan. Hazelberry got a little bit of scolding, but not as much as I did! I think the the whole Clan thinks I'm just "another apprentice", so they can belittle me all they want. But that's not fair! I work just as hard as else, if not even more, and I train - still! - with Sedgestorm, even though I'm just about warrior age!* He fumed to himself.

*And then Sedgestorm pulled me over and started to scold me! And he said we'll have to talk later?! He already scolded me enough, and Hazelberry chimed in on that one! Everyone was watching! I bet when Hazelberry was an apprentice that didn't happen. I bet she was a perfect, kind, lovely apprentice who helped all the cats of the Clan. She always tended to the queens and kits, and replaced the elder's bedding.*

He thought sarcastically to himself. Sitting down, he curled his bristling tail over his paws, looking up at Stonestar with concealed golden eyes. Owlpaw felt like the dark, brooding clouds from earlier were hanging over him, pouring down rain and continually getting rainier and darker by the moment as he got punished more and more. The plain gray leader began to speak.

"As you know, the Gathering will be soon, and I must leave one cat behind to guard camp in case anything happens. Is there any volunteers?"

*I bet they'll make me stay if nobody volunteers because of what I did*, he though irritably. Heronleap lifted up his head, which had been lowered. His eyes were red and his ears were flattened. He seemed to know what Owlpaw was thinking.

"I.. will, if nobody else will.. stay..."

Owlpaw thought, just for a second, he'd volunteer to stay. Then he

remembered that Whitepaw would be at the Gathering, and the thought disintegrated like sand in water.

Nobody spoke, though Flintpath gently placed his tail on Heronleap's shoulder.

"Okay, then its settled." Stonestar announced, "Myself, Hazelberry, Flintpath, Sedgestorm, and Owlpaw will attend the Gathering. It will occur in four days. Get plenty of sleep the day of. We cannot be late." He paused, and he leaped off the highrock, his tail lashing as he whipped around and faced Hazelberry. He whispered something to her under his breath, to which she nodded.

"Clan dismissed."

# || chapter eleven

"Owlpaw, get up. We're speaking now."

*What in StarClan's name is going on?*

Owlpaw had gone to sleep in his den right after the meeting, not wanting to be punished or talked to. He had slept for a little while, up until right now. Blinking away tiredness from his golden eyes, he sat up, smoothing down tufts of unruly fur.

"Sedgestorm?" He murmured.

"Yes, it's me," his mentor snapped, "now wake up. We need to talk."

The apprentice growled, irritated. "I don't want to. I'm tired and don't feel like being yelled at."

"That's too bad!" Sedgestorm hissed back, his ears flattening. "I've been awake for the last two hours because of Hazelberry and Stonestar's talking. They're practically screeching."

Owlpaw almost said that he didn't care, but he forced his bristling neck fur down and he licked his paw, drawing it over his ear a few times.

"Okay, fine, scold me."

Sedgestorm didn't pay attention to his sarcastic remark.

"What do you think made it okay to do that? Hazelberry is right. You are an apprentice and should never object a superior's words, even if you do not agree. Especially in the middle of a Clan meeting. Your opinion is valued, for you are our only apprentice, but you cannot put yourself above the medicine cat-"

"I wasn't putting myself above her," Owlpaw interrupted, fury building up in him. Did he really have to be scolded again? He already knew the whole 'don't disrespect your elders' spiel. "She

cannot blame whoever was sick for the death of Ashkit and Maplekit! In fact, she could easily be blamed. She was the one taking care of them. As the medicine cat, she should be able to heal them!"

Sedgestorm growled, "You know that she is working to find a cure. Do not doubt her abilities. StarClan should be sending a sign soon." The older warrior sighed, resigned. "Come. Since you cannot seem to behave yourself, we're going to hunt and patrol the borders."

Owlpaw could feel it. The forceful, furious thunderstorm building up in the dark, brooding clouds above him. It had been raining angrily, dropping cold rain on his pelt as he spoke, but now it rumbled with foreboding. He shoved the clouds away, getting up and leaving the den as quick as a flash.

He headed out of camp as quick as he'd left the den, his tail lashing as real clouds above floated across the darkening sky. It was quite early for a storm, and the apprentice guessed the majority of the Clan would be awake soon. He scented the air and caught Hazelberry's fresh scent. She'd probably gone out for some herbs.

In his pause, Sedgestorm had caught up to him. The tom took the lead, heading for the PineClan border. It reminded him of the... prey incident, that he'd never told anyone about. Deciding now was not the time, he followed his mentor.

Rain started to fall, first plinking lightly on the ground beneath their thumping paws. It soon turned to colder, bigger drops, and the clouds above growled. Owlpaw was surprised it wasn't snowing. It was definitely cold enough, with nearly everyone shivering as the numbing sir swirled around them. But, for now, it rained. Hard.

•~•~•~•

Owlpaw held a rabbit in his jaws, his mentor following, a mouse and a hare in his mouth.

Entering the camp, the apprentice dropped off the now-soaking prey. The rain hadn't let up when they had gone out. In fact, it had gotten worse. The shivering droplets of water continued to pour

down on the territories, and the clouds growled angrily above their heads. Their pelts dripped with the numbing water. The prey was soaked, and as they spotted the prey pile, they saw nothing. There was no prey.

Owlpaw glanced over at the nursery and spotted it collapsed. The strong sticks that held together the woven grasses had fallen. His golden eyes widened. Just the nursery had fallen. That's... strange.

"Woah! Did anyone notice the nursery?" Sedgestorm pointed with his tail at the fallen structure.

"I just saw it," Owlpaw meowed, his voice muffled by the prey.

Sedgestorm asserted, "Let's go drop this off in the medicine cat den so it stays dry and then we'll go check the nursery out." He padded over to the medicine cat's den, dropping off his two prey, and his apprentice soon followed. They went back over to the nursery, curiously observing it.

"It... it literally just fell." Sedgestorm and Owlpaw picked around the edges.

"A branch fell." The dark brown tom noticed, spotting a broken branch that had fallen and probably caused the whole den to collapse. "I'm guessing it was a main supporting branch of the den, and since it fell, the whole den... just fell."

Sedgestorm muttered something under his breath that sounded like "or it could be an omen..." but he turned around, heading back to the medicine cat den. "Dismissed," he called over his shoulder to his apprentice.

Owlpaw, with a flick of his tail, decided he'd go tell Stonestar about the PineClan incident. Ever since it'd happened, he hadn't told anyone. He kept reminding himself to tell someone after he was finished with whatever he was doing, but he'd never done it. He guessed the she-cat he'd met there had told her leader by now and probably planned to mention it at the Gathering, which was now in three days.

He couldn't help but be happy for the Gathering. Hopefully, it wouldn't be raining when it occurred. He'd been told stories of cats catching chills during Gatherings because it'd be raining. He guessed it would probably raining anyway. Wondering briefly if Whitepaw would be there, he remembered the last time he'd seen her. She'd been coughing, almost like she had the awful sickness.

The apprentice, lost in his thoughts, had completely forgotten about the PineClan incident. He didn't tell anyone that day, either. Padding back into his nest, he attempted to lick himself dry. His pelt was still dripping, causing his nest to be soaking. In his moons of changing moss and bringing moss to sick cats, he'd picked up that wet moss caused aching joints.

He definitely didn't want that. Grooming his pelt slowly, he felt the drops of water enter his mouth as he washed himself. With a disgusted ear flick, he continued to groom himself. If the rain would be entering his den through the ceiling...

It didn't work. His pelt was still pretty soaked, and so was his nest. He fell asleep, after tossing and turning, droplets of water splattering all over.

# || chapter twelve

A tortoiseshell she-cat left the camp, her tail tucked between her legs. Darkness seemed to swallow her up, her gaze concealed and unusually dark. Gloomy shadows surrounded her, the black blanket above her head seemed to cloak the whole world. Silence rushed through the plains, a numbing wind accompanying the silence, talking excitedly to the cold quietness.

In her mouth, she held two unmoving shapes. One fit in perfectly with the dark environment, its pelt black as night. However, the only thing that stuck out was four splotches of white. The other shape was brown, with lighter jagged markings all over it.

They hung limply in the she-cat's mouth. She dashed out into the night, heading to where their mother had been last seen. The shapes jerked left, to right, as she ran farther and farther from the camp.

Soon, she stopped, her eyes now wide and searching around the area she'd stopped at. Then, she lay down the two kits, digging a little hole in the ground each. Freshly dug up earth was nearby it, right where their mother was. The long-furred tortoiseshell placed each kit in their place, their pelts smooth and smelling of lavender.

She gently scraped earth over the kits, and she placed a stem of rosemary on each place where the kits would be. Everything seemed to lighten up at that moment. Her lungs cleared, her eyes became brighter, and she seemed as if she was able to breathe.

As soon as she headed back, everything seemed to crash down on her. Her lungs became stuffy, her eyes clouded, and the weight of everything crushed her. She entered camp and slipped back into her den. Curling up, she squeezed her eyes shut, attempting to fall asleep again. The blanket of darkness covered her, and she fell asleep.

•~•~•~•

Owlpaw woke up to rustling of bushes. The dim sun peeked into his den, trying to claw its way into the shadowed den. The gloomy shadows in the corners shrunk farther and farther away from the pale sunlight. Stretching, the apprentice yawned, licking his jaws. He left the den, his golden gaze searching the camp for the source of the noise.

It didn't seem like there was anyone in camp. Hazelberry was out, he could tell. He could smell her scent of herbs trailing outside of camp, but it was slightly stale like she had gone out in the middle of the night. A scent of lavender and rosemary accompanied her herb smell, and there was another strong smell - milk.

She'd gone out to bury the kits.

Grief - not for himself, for Heronleap - washed over him. In the process of a few days, he'd lost his mate, and his kits, all because of Hazelberry. Then, he wondered if Heronleap blamed her for their deaths. Heronleap could think it was her fault and become her enemy if he wanted to.

Shrugging, half to himself, he noticed that Sedgestorm and Flintpath's scents also had trailed out of camp. He guessed they'd went hunting. Heronleap's smell also had left the camp. Perhaps he'd gone to visit his family.

Then, the memory of PineClan hunting on their territory. Maybe now was the time to tell his leader about it. Yes, definitely. Recalling the day when it happened, he remembered the last story Stonestar had told. Traditionally, the leader would tell stories every now and then, around every three days or so. Lately, he hadn't told any stories. Sure, they'd been busy, but Stonestar always found time to tell a story, somehow.

The stories often related to current things in the Clan. Once, he'd heard that Stonestar had told of a hard leaf-bare in the middle of a very warm new-leaf, when the sickness hadn't cloaked the lives of everyone, in all Clans. The last story had been about him, his past and the present in the sickened world.

Shaking the thoughts off, he padded to the entrance of his leader's

den, and he peered in. He didn't see anyone right away, and after more searching in the den with his bright golden eyes, he decided to just ask if he could come in.

"Stonestar? May I come in? It's Owlpaw."

Soft murmurs sounded inside the den, and then a voice spoke clearly.

"Yes. Come in."

Entering the den, he noticed that Hazelberry was sitting near Stonestar, her tail curled over her paws, seemingly flustered and upset.

"Sit," meowed Hazelberry, flicking her tail at a spot in the den. Owlpaw went over and sat down. "What is it?" She queried, her eyes dark and concealed.

"Well, a few days ago, I was hunting near PineClan's border, and I scented a mouse, and some PineClan scent over the border," he began, his golden gaze darting between the two as he spoke, "So, when I went to the border, I scented some faint blood and the mouse smell was just gone. I hung around and Troutfur stepped out of the bushes. I greeted her and we talked briefly before she noticed I was... on edge, and I got her to tell me that she'd hunted over the border."

Hazelberry visibly looked more agitated, and Stonestar's fur was on end.

"And then I took the mouse. She threatened me and said to not tell you because if Robinstar found out, she'd be mad... I'm guessing that Robinstar already knows and Troutfur is just covering up for it."

Stonestar nodded, half to himself. "I'll mention it at the Gathering. Robinstar might be having a prey shortage, but we're normally the first ones to have that problem..." he trailed off.

"Well..." Hazelberry looked up from her paws. "Lilybreeze was a bit skinny last time I saw her, but she normally doesn't eat much prey,"

she offered.

"This is for Hazelberry and I to discuss," Stonestar cut in. "You're dismissed, Owlpaw. Go get something to eat and share it with someone."

As he left the den, he muttered to himself, "Thanks, Owlpaw. No problem, Stonestar."

# || chapter thirteen

Owlpaw woke up to a strangely white, bright light leaking into his den. Blinking his golden eyes, he looked up, and suddenly a sinking feeling seemed to drag the whole world down.

A layer of pristine white covered the ground. It had been rather cold that night, the numbing air racing excitedly around the camp and peeking into the dens curiously. It had particularly taken a liking to Owlpaw, curling around him and providing cold warmth. The apprentice was sure he could've heard raindrops before he'd slept, but he wasn't exactly sure.

Now, it was truly leaf-bare. Owlpaw groomed his dark brown fur, hoping to warm himself up a little before he went into the snowy world outside. After he'd finished, he got up, fluffing up his fur, and he left the den.

The sun hung on the horizon, seemingly stuck and unwilling to move. Its warmthless, pale light reflected off of the layer of fluffy snow, making the pristine white glitter brightly. The sky was cloudless, leaving the dreary blue sky with no protection. Owlpaw glanced at the fresh-kill pile, and spotted a snow-covered mouse and a rabbit.

With a swift movement, he raced across the snow, throwing it up in his tracks. He sunk in quickly, and he soon realized it was deeper than he had expected. Shaking his head, he continued trudging through the white snow. After what seemed like forever, he came upon the prey pile. He cleared away the snow that surrounded the pile, and he gently lifted each piece of prey up to shake off the snow. He wanted to take a piece, but he knew that more prey would come soon, and someone else would probably be more hungry than him.

Scenting the air to see if any hunting patrols were out, he smelled fresh snow and his scent. Nobody else was awake. He sighed, not

really wanting to go hunting all by himself. Again.

Then, his mentor exited the warrior's den. Busying himself with the prey pile, he heard Sedgestorm come over.

"Awake already?" Sedgestorm asked.

"Clearly," Owlpaw murmured, pretending to finish up with clearing snow away.

Sedgestorm sat down near him, where there wasn't any snow, meowing, "Well, let's first clear away some more snow, then we'll go check the borders and do some hunting."

"Well, okay," Owlpaw muttered, standing up. Soon enough, they began to shove the snow out of the camp. The apprentice would pick up a little bit of snow and shove it near Sedgestorm, who would shuffle out of camp and push it away. The clearing, little by little, soon had little pieces of snow. Sedgestorm had claimed it was to let everyone know it had snowed. But Owlpaw shoved it out of camp anyway.

Despite the frozen earth below his paws, he felt warmer than he had earlier. The exercise had warmed him up a bit, but his ears were still flattened as if it would make him warmer. Shivering, he licked his paw and drew it over his now-perked ear.

"Come on, we're going to check borders and do some hunting."

Sedgestorm's voice broke into his thoughts and his yellow-golden gaze switched over to see the tom at the entrance to the camp. He padded over, following Sedgestorm out of camp. They maneuvered around the cold snow, picking their way through it. The apprentice felt like his paws were freezing off, yet he continued along. He couldn't stop and ask to go back. That would be kit-like.

He jumped over a frozen, snow-covered tussock of grass. Sedgestorm was leading him to the SquirrelClan borders. As he breathed out a sigh of relief, a cloud of warm breath puffed in his face. It was a good thing they weren't going to the PineClan border... He couldn't deal with the prey-stealers right now. They

needed to confront them at the Gathering, not at another border spat. Huffing, he realized they'd reached the border.

Skidding to a stop in front of it, his golden-yellow eyes trained on Sedgestorm, he watched as he flicked his tail and scented the air. He padded off in the other direction, his ear twitching as if to signal to meet back here when he was done.

Owlpaw walked off in the other direction, beginning to mark the borders. He scented the air, catching a few stale cat scents. Guessing that they were probably going to mark the borders sometime today, he opened his mouth to drink in the scents of the world around him. Catching the smell of stale cats, he shrugged, picking his way over lumps of snow to mark the borders.

Fresh cat scent washed over him. Backing away from the border, his gaze traveling along the border. Drinking in the scents again, he caught fresh cat scent, stronger than before.

"Hello?"

A dark brown, mottled she-cat stepped out to meet him, followed by a  brown-and-white tom with tabby stripes. Owlpaw drew himself up to his full height, his neck fur rising. Forcing it down, he mewed a polite greeting.

"Hello, Talondust and Mossheart," Inclining his head, he continued, "What brings you here?"

Mossheart flicked her mottled, dark brown tail back and forth. "Marking borders. What about you?" Her eyes were critical, surveying the apprentice up and down. Talondust looked tired beside her, his eyes shadowed and his fur ungroomed. What could've happened? Maybe... Yellowstar was sick...?

Completely forgetting about Whitepaw, he answered, "Marking borders."

"By yourself?" Talondust cut in, curiosity brightening his eyes for a moment, darkening as Owlpaw replied.

"Of course not. Sedgestorm is over there."

Then, in a split second, Talondust raced off, his pelt ruffled as the pristine white snow was thrown up in his tracks. A small pile of snow was tossed at Mossheart's paws. He noticed her claws were unsheathed. Her eyes became shadowed, her fur raising defensively. Her gaze seemed to slice right through Owlpaw, and he flinched under her gaze.

"Excuse him," she muttered, adding a few things too that Owlpaw couldn't hear.

"Oh...? What did you say?" He pricked an ear, straining to hear the quiet, mumbly tone that Mossheart was speaking in. "Repeat that..?" Whiskers twitching, he waited for her to speak.

With an irritated hiss, she followed Talondust, her gaze sharp and furious.

*What is going on? Did something happen?*

Owlpaw lashed his tail. After a bit, Sedgestorm padded up to Owlpaw and mewed something in a brisk tone.

"Come on. We're going back."

Confusion flashed in his golden-yellow gaze. "What..? Why?"

"Do some hunting. Meet me at camp. The Gathering is tomorrow, so get some sleep."

Owlpaw began to protest, but Sedgestorm sprinted off, snow clouding up in his tracks.

# || chapter fourteen

"Owlpaw, get up. We're going to be late!"

A familiar-sounding hiss filled with nothing but irritation woke the apprentice out of his long, quiet, pleasant slumber. Shaking his fur out, he licked his fur clean with swift movements. They could not be late to the Gathering. Coldness filled him and he squeezed his golden-yellow eyes shut.

"Come on!" The hiss turned into a furious, fierce snarl. His eyes opened as quick as a flash and he ran out of the den, his tail streaming wildly behind him. It was Stonestar. Suppressing a flinch, he glanced around. Sedgestorm, Flintpath, and Hazelberry were standing impatiently at the entrance.

"I-um-?" Owlpaw didn't finish.

Stonestar hissed. "Come on. Let's go."

The tom, with a swish of his plain gray tail, disappeared. Sedgestorm and Flintpath shared a blank look as Hazelberry sprinted after him, and then Sedgestorm and Flintpath were soon to follow. Owlpaw murmured something under his breath, trying to gain understanding.

"Go on," a voice came from behind him. It was Heronleap. "Tell everyone I said hello."

Startled, he turned around. Heronleap looked oddly calm and happy. His eyes were glittering, his tail curled neatly over his paws. His fur was groomed nicely, his ears perked.

He repeated himself. "Go on."

Owlpaw blinked and ran, following the other's scents. Quickly navigating himself around rocks and tussocks of snow-covered grass, he soon found himself a few fox-lengths away from the rest of

the group. He slowed down, attempting to keep his breathing steady. For all they knew, he hadn't stayed behind. He'd followed them like he was supposed to the entire time.

"Heronleap said hello," he meowed, flicking his tail, still a bit confused about the strange encounter with the tom.

Sedgestorm asked, "Is that all he said?"

"Well, yeah, he just said to tell you all he said hello," Owlpaw replied.

"Ah," Stonestar murmured and whispered something to his medicine cat. She nodded.

Owlpaw thought back to all the Gatherings he'd been to before. When he was born, his mother and father had both gone to the Gathering, leaving him and some other warriors he didn't know at the camp. Plodding on, he recalled asking one of the warriors where everyone went. The warrior had replied with something sarcastic that he couldn't remember.

He remembered his first Gathering, too. The Clans had just gotten word of the sickness and around ten warriors per Clan had come. Members of his Clan had told him about the sickness and he had just shrugged it off, guessing the medicine cats would just heal it.

The next Gathering was even worse. There was around five or six warriors per Clan, and at least two of them had the beginnings of the sickness. He remembered that one clearer. He'd stuck to the outsides, away from the sickness, with his mentor, Sedgestorm. Everyone was so close back then.

As he looked up, he spotted the Gathering island looming over him. Shadows fell over the MudClan cat's forms and before he knew it they were walking into the Gathering.

He squeezed through the small, leafy hole that was the entrance to the clearing. Leaves surrounded the Gathering island. There was a huge tree in front of him, and beneath it were four roots for the deputies of Clans to sit in. An assortment of rocks lay next to the

deputies, slightly elevated from the ground - a place for the medicine cats.

The huge tree seemed as if it wanted, or was trying to, claw its way into the dark sky, its spindly branches reaching up to the black blanket. The stars seemed to inch away from it. In the clearing was some grass, which was waving up to the tree in a friendly hello. A cold wind rushed around, excitably racing from place to place, blowing up the grass. Unfortunately for the grass, it was about to get trampled by the cats of MudClan.

There were already cats here. Observing their red, brown, and white pelts, and glancing up at their leader, he guessed it was PetalClan. Hazelberry broke away from the group and headed over to where a reddish-brown tabby tom sat, near some rocks. She tilted her head up, murmuring something to the tom, who nodded.

Finchtuft, Sorrelflame, and Mousewhisker were huddled in one of the corners.

Sedgestorm began to pad over and Owlpaw flicked his tail nervously. Following his mentor, he spotted Quailnose emerge from the shadows that covered the leaves. Owlpaw surveyed them, their gazes blank. Frustration pulsing inside of him, he searched their eyes.

"Hello, PetalClan," Sedgestorm mewed politely, inclining his head.

Finchtuft stood up, returning the kind gesture. "How is MudClan?"

Quailnose glanced at Owlpaw, offering a smile. The apprentice wasn't sure if it was meaningful.

"Fine," replied Owlpaw, catching a glimpse of his mentor, "And how is PetalClan?"

Sorrelflame bent her head to murmur something to Finchtuft and he nodded, while Mousewhisker brewed in his own thoughts. His brown fur was raised slightly, and Quailnose's brown-spotted nose was tipped towards the sky.

Sorrelflame calmly answered, "Fine. I'm glad to hear MudClan is

doing the same."

Then, Owlpaw pricked an ear, hearing pawsteps pounding nearby. Sedgestorm had clearly noticed this, for he apologetically dipped his head at the other cats, murmuring a goodbye as the two headed for their own group.

A mottled gray she-cat squeezed through the entrance of the Gathering, followed by several other toms and she-cats, gray and brown pelts almost identical until a calico shoved through.

*It's PineClan,* he realized.

One of them scuffed their paw against the ground, seemingly unwanting to move, but a strong, brown-furred she-cat nudged the ashy-gray tom from behind.

Robinstar strolled over to the huge tree, glancing up at it and then launching herself up. Lilybreeze, the medicine cat, trotted over to where the others were sitting, plopping herself down on the rock. As everyone turned away, the PineClan cats settled in the other corner of the Gathering. Owlpaw turned to look at the empty corner of the last Clan - SquirrelClan.

"I apologize for our lateness," Robinstar meowed, her gaze sweeping over the cats, "However, it appears SquirrelClan has not arrived yet. We may start without them or we could wait."

Stonestar kept his head down, tail flicking, seemingly deep in thought.

Heatherstar, after seeing that Stonestar was not going to speak yet, observed all the cats. Some were talking softly to another - mostly Finchtuft and Sorrelflame, and some of the cats from PineClan. The medicine cats spread whispers throughout them, looking at one another.

"I think we wait," decreed Heatherstar, "All of the Clans have been late before, and it wouldn't be fair to start without them. Of course... the sickness may be keeping them back... and that would not be their fault."

Stonestar murmured, "But we do not want to keep StarClan waiting if they truly are not attending this Gathering."

Whispers of agreement spread through the crowd as the cats glanced around. Owlpaw scented the air, catching cat scent. He pricked his ear curiously. All heads turned towards the entrance, and everyone seemed to gasp.

Cats with matted fur and dull eyes stumbled into the Gathering clearing.

"Yellowstar?!"

# || chapter fifteen

"We're fine."

The grumbly growl echoed through the clearing. Surprised eyes flashed nervously as cats glanced around at each other. Heatherstar and Robinstar looked down at the cats of SquirrelClan, their eyes switching from cat to cat. Owlpaw looked through the minimal cats who staggered their way in, searching for only one cat.

His golden-yellow gaze was met with pelts that were unkempt and dirty. It seemed as if they hadn't been groomed for days. Their eyes shone with exhaustion, though they dulled under the bright light of the full moon. Fur prickling, Owlpaw watched as Yellowstar hauled herself up onto her branch, sitting down and curling her tail curtly over her paws.

Stonestar blinked, shaking his head.

"This is the Gathering," he announced, his tail swishing behind him. "I would like Yellowstar to speak first."

She sighed softly, the noise quiet and indistinguishable. The she-cat stood up, her piercing green eyes surveying the cats of the Clans, tail waving absently behind her. She took in a deep breath as if she was inhaling all the confidence in the world.

"SquirrelClan has been battling the sickness in the past moon," Yellowstar meowed evenly, her gaze dropping to her paws. Her voice grew quiet, soft, and gentle. "Despite Shrewfoot's efforts to try and cure the disease, Whitepaw has succumbed to it."

A small murmur of collective "I'm sorry" rang through the clearing.

Owlpaw felt as if the world was spinning around him.

*Whitepaw is dead?*

Blinking, he refused to believe it. His only friend, the only

apprentice in the other Clans, was gone. His shoulders sagged, his eyes darkening. He felt a silky tail lay gently on his shoulder, but he could barely feel the kindness it carried. Feeling as if he was sinking deep into a corner, a hole, of despair, his yellow-golden gaze flicked to his paws.

Studying them, he soon closed his eyes, feeling grief overwhelm him. He would never see Whitepaw's well-groomed calico pelt bouncing around at the Gatherings. He'd never see her happy again, her bright gaze lit up with excitement.

His dark gaze returned to the leaders and medicine cats.

Shrewfoot looked as if he, too, had fallen into the hole. His eyes were dark and shadowy as if protecting the secrets he had endured while attempting to cure her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save her," Shrewfoot's voice crackled uneasily and Owlpaw flinched.

Stonestar stood up immediately, as Yellowstar sat down, resigned.

"That means Owlpaw is the only apprentice left in all of the Clans."

The apprentice hadn't even realized it till now. His eyes widening, he shrunk beneath the many gazes that switched towards him.

"Wait, where's Meadowdapple-?"

"Meadowdapple, unfortunately, passed away. She was pregnant with kits and she died in the kitting. The kits died due to the powerful grip of the sickness... Hazelberry tried her best but unfortunately, without a cure, she was unable to help... But we are... we are strong," he continued, his voice growing loud and booming, strong and powerful, "Owlpaw is the only apprentice and he is doing very well."

The cats of all Clans gave a small cheer and Owlpaw shrunk farther against the ground. Did they really think he was that... great? Did they think he contributed that much to the Clan?

He smiled, straightening.

"Thank you," Dipping his head to the cats around him, he gave a small purr. Sedgestorm nodded approvingly.

"I will go next," meowed Heatherstar. Her gaze was brightened and light. Stonestar inclined his head, withdrawing as he sat down.

Her gaze traveled along the cats, and then she flicked an ear, her gaze glancing upwards. Owlpaw, curious, tilted his head up, his yellow-golden eyes trained on the black sky. There was a small cloud inching closer and closer towards the moon.

Confusion flickered through him.

*What in StarClan's name is happening?*

There was no fighting. Heatherstar began to speak, but Owlpaw's gaze was stuck on the sky. Straining to hear, he listened for any words that any cat would be angrily muttering. But he could not hear a thing.

The scent of sickness seemed to surround him and he flinched, shaking his head. Glancing back at the black sky, he spotted the whispy cloud drifting over the moon. His fur prickled, the smell of sickness overwhelming him. It clogged his senses, shoving itself into every place in his mind until all he could think about was the sickness and the clouds inching over the moon.

*What's going on? This must be in my head. Of course it is. Nobody is fighting.*

The thoughts drifted through his head and his neck fur absently rose. Then, he felt a tail on his shoulder. His head snapping to the side, he realized Stonestar was next to him, the leader's eyes shimmering with concern.

"...coming? Owlpaw?"

He only caught the end of his leader's words.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," Owlpaw murmured, shaking his head. His gaze traveled up to the dark, night sky, and spotted the moon, now completely clear of any clouds. The bright stars next to it twinkled,

smiling down at him.

Standing up, he turned to see his Clan standing at the entrance. He'd missed out on the rest of the Gathering. He trotted swiftly over, his tail waving behind him as a few cats called out goodbyes. He recognized Thrushpad's voice, along with a grumbly Troutfur. Nutgaze's crackly voice called out a farewell, followed by a soft "see you!" from Sorrelflame and Mousewhisker.

MudClan filed out of the entrance to the Gathering. Sedgestorm and Owlpaw padded along at the rear.

"Did you hear what Heatherstar said? She said barely anything about her Clan, only about you and the... the kits, plus a bit about Whitepaw. She was just avoiding the topic... I don't think her Clan is as well off as she's putting out."

The words drifted from his Clanmates, soft and quiet. He couldn't tell who was speaking; the voices blended together into a mixture of gentle and sharp points of speech. Soon, he realized they came upon the camp.

The cats of MudClan filed in as smoothly as they'd left the Gathering. Stonestar and Hazelberry headed straight for their dens, as did his mentor. Heronleap appeared to already be asleep. Flintpath soon followed Sedgestorm into the warriors den.

Frowning, Owlpaw headed for his own den, curling up in his nest. He noticed there were two extra nests in the den. They were small, only small enough for a newly apprenticed cat. The moss looked fresh and clean, with no water droplets on top of the shadowed moss.

Scenting one of the nests, he wasn't sure what it was. It smelled faintly like metallic blood, and he flinched backward, touching his muzzle to the other nest. It also smelled identically like the other one, the same tang of crimson blood. Detecting a bit of cat scent, he flicked his whiskers.

He couldn't identify the cat. It didn't smell like anyone who he knew, or recognized. Placing his muzzle on the other nest again, he

closed his eyes and searched for any kind of clue. One nest reminded him of a simpler, happier time, without the constant threats of...

The sickness.

He scented both nests again, his ears flattened.

The nests smelled exactly like the sickness.

# || chapter sixteen

A chilling wind entered the apprentice's den, swirling around and hissing angrily. It paused, stomping furiously around the den in a fit of rage before whisking out. The grasses waved, and the den shook slightly.

Owlpaw soon woke up, feeling frigidness creep into his pelt. He shook himself, beginning to slowly groom his dark brown fur to try and warm himself up. Trying to keep the strokes of his tongue swift, he curled his tail around his now-shivering form. Shaking himself out again, he fluffed out his fur.

His yellowy-golden gaze flicked to the entrance of the den.

He blinked, shaking his head, before looking at the entrance again.

*What is that?*

There was a small plant-like object at the entrance of the den. Padding forwards to inspect it, he peered at the plant. It had sharp edges and it looked like a pine needle. But it didn't smell like a pine needle.

It smelled like an herb.

He couldn't tell which herb it was. Hazelberry might be able to tell which it was, though. Flicking an ear, he began to pad past the herb but heard a sound. Confusion flickered through him, though he stopped and stepped backward.

"Go to the Moonpool..."

*What in StarClan's name is going on? I need some herbs to calm me*

*down. I can't keep imagining things like this.*

"It's real, Owlpaw.."

*Okay, no, it's not. This is fake. I'm imagining this. There's no way this herb is speaking to me.*

A freezing breeze brushed up against Owlpaw's pelt and he shivered.

"This is real, Owlpaw... Please trust me?"

"Fine." He hissed, finding this ridiculous. *Can I really be talking to this herb?*

The breeze curled around him, smiling lightly as it swirled away. He huffed, placing his tail on his paws, sitting down.

"Go to the Moonpool when it's right before sundown. There will be three other cats there and we will instruct you what to do. Please trust us... There's nothing else we can do... You're not imagining it, Owlpaw, we're real."

He asked, "What kind of herb are you?" He blinked, and before he could inspect it, the herb was gone.

*This is ridiculous. There is no way that was real. Of course, it's fake. There's practically no way some random unidentified herb can just speak to me.*

But he couldn't help but feel nervous. If he didn't go and everyone else who supposedly got the message too did go, he'd ruin it all.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do.

But he thought he could hear Sedgestorm's voice outside of the den. So he padded swiftly out of it, fluffing his fur against the cold wind.

•~•~•~•

"Dismissed."

Owlpaw dipped his head, his paws aching with the battle session Sedgestorm and he had just done. It was almost sundown and he still hadn't decided if he wanted to go or not. The training session had been particularly exhausting. His tail flicking, he grabbed a vole from the fresh-kill pile and curled up outside of the apprentice's den, quickly taking a few bites.

Flavors exploded on his tongue and before he could savor the lovely taste of vole he swallowed the meat. His belly felt warm as he took another bite of the creature, soon finishing it off and burying it. Golden gaze flicking towards the sky, he noticed the sun sitting on the horizon.

*I have to go.*

Giving his fur a quick grooming, he fluffed it out. He surveyed the camp, gaze traveling around, and then sprinted out.

The cold wind rushed through his fur as he breathed in and out, puffs of warm breath billowing out in front of him. Pushing forward, he swerved around a rock, snow swelling behind him as he curved sharply around another jutting rock. Quickly heading in the direction of the Moonpool, he was acutely aware of the sun setting above his head.

The light that came from the now-setting sun seemed to drain away from the ground ahead of him as he continued on. He could almost sense the darkness seemingly overtaking the area around him. Racing to the Moonpool faster, he picked up a scent of a PetalClan cat.

"Owlpaw?"

It was Finchtuft.

"Hi, Finchtuft..." he trailed off, turning to see the tom.

"You got the message too?" Finchtuft asked, eyes concerned and confused.

Owlpaw nodded, "Do you know what herb it was-?"

"Wait, Owlpaw, Finchtuft?"

A voice called out. It sounded slightly familiar. Finchtuft and Owlpaw turned around to see Talondust and Logbite standing a few fox-lengths behind them.

"Greetings," Finchtuft mewed to them, dipping his head. Owlpaw did the same, and Talondust inclined his head, Logbite nodding.

"You all got the message?" Owlpaw queried.

They all nodded.

"Do you know what herb it was...?" The apprentice felt strange speaking about this weird herb that had spoken to them all.

Finchtuft muttered, "No, why would that matter?"

Owlpaw flicked his tail, mulling it over when Talondust exclaimed;

"Maybe it has to do with the sickness!"

Logbite gave a disdainful sniff. "Doubtful, we seem like randomly chosen cats. There has to be a commonality between us," she shook her head, her gaze traveling among them. "It can't be just warriors, because of Owlpaw."

Each of the cats seemed to collectively think, their heads tilted down, intently studying their paws. Their ears were flattened in thought, tails held erect.

"Wait!" Finchtuft looked up. "I'm the youngest of my Clan and I'm healthy. What about you all?"

Logbite and Talondust both mewed, "I'm the youngest and healthy, too."

"And Owlpaw is the youngest, obviously, and I know he's healthy!" Finchtuft gave a little jump of excitement.

Logbite frowned, "But how does that have to do with anything? It doesn't really pertain to the sickness at *all.* Well, yeah, we're

healthy, but all the leaders are fairly healthy, and the medicine cats aren't deathly ill either. So it has to do with us being young?"

Owlpaw's gaze was still stuck on his paws when he looked up.

"Oh no, the moon!"

Everyone looked up, spotting it climbing into the sky. They clambered towards the Moonpool, swiftly entering with soundless pawsteps.

Talondust whispered, "Lick up some of the water and sleep next to the Moonpool." Owlpaw nodded, and he curled up next to it, lapping up some of the water.

It tasted like starlight, its icy feeling traveling through him. A pang of chilliness pulsed inside of him, and he shivered, curling his tail around his body. He listened to Talondust's breathing slow, and the rhythmic, collective breathing from Finchtuft and Logbite. It swirled around, lulling him into a light sleep.

# || chapter seventeen

It felt like a moment had passed when he woke up. Pricking his ears, he opened his eyes and glanced around. This was not the Moonpool.

The sky was black as night - it was night, in fact - and it was decorated with plenty of stars. There were no clouds and there was no moon, though the world around him seemed hazy and light. Light green grass perked up underneath the apprentice's paws as his warm, golden gaze traveled around the area. There were minimal trees dotting the area. A river babbled nearby, rushing over slate-colored rocks.

Flicking his tail, he instinctively scented the air, catching Finchtuft, Logbite, and Talondust's smells all mixed together. He followed the scent to spot the three standing in a crooked-looking triangle. Finchtuft wordlessly waved his tail to the empty corner.

Confused, he obeyed, padding over to the corner and standing around. Everyone waited.

A frigid wind swirled around them and he squinted up at the sky. It seemed as if shapes were moving from the stars, lightly padding down. He recognized the shimmering, calico pelt.

"Whitepaw!" The voice came from Talondust and himself. Several other cats drifted down from the stars, including Maplekit, Ashkit, and Meadowdapple, from MudClan. The she-cat flicked her tail at Owlpaw, and she landed on the ground with a soft thump. She padded away from the other Clan cats and waved her tail again.

Owlpaw padded over to her and the kits, glancing down at the small kits. They didn't seem weak and feeble anymore; their well-groomed pelts glittered with starlight, and although they were small and young, their eyes seemed to glow with wisdom.

"Owlpaw," Meadowdapple dipped her head to him and his golden gaze flicked down, studying his paws, "I'm sure you don't know why, completely, you were called here tonight."

*You're right on that one,* he thought.

"I know I'm right," she mewed as if reading his thoughts, "But that doesn't diminish the purpose of you coming here. I'm glad you decided to come. It's important for the survival of all Clans."

He looked up. "*All* Clans?" She nodded, placing her tail on his shoulder.

"But we are here to guide you," she assured him.

Frowning, he asked, "So, why did you call me - ah, us - here? Do you have something to tell us?"

Her gaze seemed to focus on something behind him and she bobbed her head slightly, glancing back down at her kits. She floated with quick steps over to where the other Clan cats had gone. The rest of the starry cats seemed to be doing the same and Owlpaw frowned, unsure of what to do. He felt a nudge and looked down to see Maplekit nodding forwards, and Ashkit pointing his tail towards the cats.

He hesitated and then nuzzled each of the kits. Then, he bounded off to where the others were standing.

"...Yes, Talondust," mewed a light brown tabby tom, nodding at the warrior, and his eyes switched over to Owlpaw. He glanced at the other starry cats and they dipped their heads.

Meadowdapple stepped forwards, her gaze traveling among them.

"This does indeed have to do with the sickness, but the stars are not here to tell you the cure. Simply to guide you in the right direction."

A gray-and-white patched tom stepped beside her, and so did the light brown tabby tom from earlier. Whitepaw's calico pelt shoved beside the tabby tom. All of the starry cats formed a swarm behind the four main cats, their heads raised towards the dark sky.

"Smell all the herbs in the den; the cure is right under your nose."

The words were first a small murmur, carried out by the four main cats who stood at the front of the crowd. Then, it got louder and louder, swirling around in the air. The wind itself seemed to chant the words endlessly, rushing past the four living cats and making them shiver as the words traveled around them, curling in their ears and in their minds.

The starry cats slowly began to fade away, the ones in the back disappearing first. Their faces morphed into horrified, agony-filled expressions. As they faded, the four main cats began to wither in front of the living cats, their smiles turning into pained, soundless yowls as if they were dying again.

Owlpaw's vision began to fade out, as did the cats in front of them. Their faces became blurry, though the agonization was clear in their expressions. As he felt the ground disappear beneath his paws, he saw one thing clearly.

Two small, limp bodies on the ground - Ashkit and Maplekit.

^~^~^~^

With a jolt, Owlpaw woke up to see the Moonpool glittering ahead of him. Moonlight clawed its way into the cave, and his gaze switched around. Talondust and Finchtuft seemed to still be asleep, but Logbite wasn't at the Moonpool.

He stood up, eyes flashing as he spotted Logbite sitting at the entrance. Her head was tilted up, and her fur was raised slightly, her ears flattened. Cautiously, he walked over to her, and her head snapped over to meet his gaze.

Looking away, he heard pawsteps behind him. Finchtuft and Talondust soon padded over to the cats, and a long moment of silence stretched between them. Nobody knew what to do or say, their eyes glancing around, all asking the same question:

*Who will speak first?*

Owlpaw frowned, and before he could offer a word, Talondust

piped up.

"I think we all know what we're going to do."

*Do we*? Owlpaw thought incredulously and shared a glance with Logbite that echoed his thoughts exactly.

Logbite murmured, "Do we?"

"Well, I-I thought we would tell our leaders and our medicine cats..." Talondust's gaze flicked to the ground.

Finchtuft sighed, "That was... kind of a given..."

They all talked quietly, their voices gentle, and Owlpaw didn't really know how to react or reply to any of the cats' words. He wanted to add something to the conversation, but he just didn't know how.

Losing himself in his thoughts, he didn't even notice Logbite trying to speak with him.

"Owlpaw? Are you okay?" She nudged him.

He shook himself, muttering, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"So? What do you think it meant?"

Frowning, he replied, "I don't know. We have the herb already, clearly."

"Well, yeah, I guess..." Logbite shrugged. Her ears were flattened, eyes narrowed.

"I should... probably be getting back now... Sedgestorm will probably be wondering where I am."

"We all should be going back." Finchtuft's voice became slightly louder. The sky above them was beginning to turn a bit peachy, the dark blue sky alarmed by the sudden change as it began to fade away. The stars were waving goodbye to the grasses that poked up between the small amount of snow on the ground.

Talondust nodded in agreement. In a moment, the tom was dashing off, his tail streaming out behind him. With a quick movement, Finchtuft was following him, but in a slightly different direction.

Logbite and Owlpaw nodded at each other, and the she-cat was off.

Owlpaw padded slowly back to camp, his paws dragging through the cold snow.

# || chapter eighteen

The sun rested neatly on the horizon, its pale, leaf-bare light shedding over the rocky plains. It smiled at the cold winds that ran around the plains.

Owlpaw's fur prickled as the chilly breeze passed by him. He fluffed up his brown fur, hoping to keep himself warmer. His warm, golden gaze was bright, despite how his frigid paws dragged along the snow-covered ground. Luckily, the snow was not heavy; it was a light covering, though it still chilled the apprentice's paws.

His gaze traveling around, he realized how anxious he was to get back to camp. Hopefully, nobody would be too upset with him. He doubted they'd be upset as soon as they realized why he was gone. Exhaustion dragging at his paws, he shivered, letting the chill spread through him, too tired to silence the feeling.

Spotting the camp's walls, excitement fizzled inside of him. After all this time away from camp, he'd finally be able to curl up in his nest and fall asleep to the quiet, faint snoring of his Clanmates and the cold, chilly wind that swirled around the camp.

*I should plan this out first.* He thought and spotted the entrance to the camp.

Before he could even start to plan, he entered the camp, his gaze switching around. Nobody seemed to be awake.

*Who should I tell first?* He wondered.

Deciding to tell Hazelberry, the apprentice headed into the medicine cat's den. He peeked his head in.

"Hazelberry?"

A pause filled his ears, and then heard a shuffling deep inside of the den.

"Owlpaw! Where were you?"

In moments, the medicine cat was standing in front of him. Her ears were flattened against her tortoiseshell head, her eyes narrowed, critically observing the apprentice's exhausted state.

"Are you... okay? Here..." she mumbled, stepping aside and leading him into the den. She offered him some herbs, but he shook his head, the memory of the strange, talking herb too fresh in his mind.

The she-cat pushed the herbs closer to him, "Please, I think it'll help you."

"Please, no," he refused, "I'm sorry... just not... right now."

She sighed, looking away. Taking the herbs and disappearing into the den, she returned and surveyed him once again.

"What happened?"

He took a deep breath and explained everything. How he'd smelled sickness on the nests, the strange, speaking herb, going to the Moonpool, meeting up with the other Clan cats, and then the whole dream he had. She didn't interrupt him once, listening intently to every word he said. Finally, he finished explaining, and she looked as if she was deep in thought.

"Do you know what kind of herb it was?" Hazelberry asked, "If we already have the herb that cures the sickness, I bet the herb that spoke to you was the herb that is the cure."

Owlpaw's eyes widened. *Of course!*

"No, I don't know what it was..."

She frowned, "Can you describe it for me?"

Trying to recall the looks of the herb, he meowed, "It had little pine-like shoots growing out of it... I don't really remember, I'm

sorry..."

"It's alright," responded Hazelberry in a quiet, gentle tone. A long silence stretched between the two, filling Owlpaw with a sense of dread.

*She doesn't know what to think about it... What are we going to do if the medicine cat doesn't even know what to do?*

*Stop overreacting, Owlpaw. We can just tell Stonestar and see what* he *thinks.*

"Should we go tell Stonestar?" Owlpaw asked, and the tortoiseshell nodded. She brushed past him, leaving the den, and the apprentice quickly followed. They headed for the leader's den, and Hazelberry peeked her head in first, mewing something to Stonestar.

The medicine cat disappeared into the den, and the apprentice uncertainly followed. He sat down to the right of the entrance, glancing around at the den before meeting Stonestar's gaze.

"Where were you last night, Owlpaw?" Stonestar queried, his gaze flicking from cat to cat.

"Well... that's kind of what we were going to talk about." Hazelberry glanced at the apprentice.

A short silence stretched between the three cats.

Stonestar nudged him, "Go on."

Owlpaw took in a deep breath and explained everything again, from the herb to the Moonpool, and the strange words the StarClan cats had said over and over again. Stonestar nodded slowly, and Hazelberry added the small discussion that they'd had, which was only about the herb.

"I think what Hazelberry said about that herb being the cure is correct. But there's no way to tell if it's the right herb or not, so we can't just go around using all the herbs," reasoned Stonestar.

Hazelberry interjected, "Actually, I think that's what we need to do."

Stonestar tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

The she-cat glanced at Owlpaw and then began explaining her idea.

"I think we should start with a certain herb from my den. Obviously, it cannot be poisonous, there's no way a poisonous herb would cure a sickness. We'll use the herb on a cat, no matter if they're sick or not - it should heal them... I know almost every cat has a touch of the sickness. There's no possible way anybody has absolutely no touch of the sickness.

"When we determine if that herb worked or not, we move onto a different herb and choose a different cat. We'll continue until we find an herb in my den that works. If we don't find one... then... well, we misunderstood it."

Stonestar studied the ground, his gaze dark and thoughtful.

*Well, I guess that would work...* Owlpaw thought.

"I suppose that would work," the apprentice mewed.

Stonestar flicked his whiskers, "Should we call a meeting with the other Clans? Maybe they should test it too, and we can meet up every two sunrises. We'll all pick some herbs that we want to try, so we don't retry herbs."

Hazelberry frowned.

"But wouldn't it be better if we were credited with the cure rather than all Clans?"

# || chapter nineteen

A long, uncertain, nervous silence filled the den.

"Hazelberry, that shouldn't matter," Owlpaw mewed, unsure of whether or not it was his place to speak up, "As a Clan cat, we try to help all the Clans... and now, more than ever, because of the sickness. I thought, you, as a medicine cat would be wanting to save all cats..."

Stonestar's gaze was studying the ground. He didn't speak up.

"But it would be better for the Clan," Hazelberry protested, her voice strong and confident, "If we cured ourselves before the other Clans, we could wait till the Gathering - hopefully we will have found the cure by then - and then tell them."

Owlpaw scuffed his paw, irritated, against the ground of the den. "But it'll take even longer for the sicker cats of the other Clans to be healed, and then we still have to survive the entirety of leaf-bare after we survive the sickness. Plus, we won't be as strong as the other Clans..."

Hazelberry narrowed her eyes at him, and he shrunk nervously under her gaze.

*Is she mad at me, or simply just fighting for her point?* He asked himself, and to his disappointment, he could not answer the question.

"Think how much higher everyone would think of us if *we* single-pawedly cured it!" She exclaimed, unsheathing her claws and leaping up. She scored marks on the ground, pointing to certain points, seemingly not really trying to show anything.

She pointed at a small circle, "Look, look! If we cure it and tell only

one Clan, they'll claim they thought of the cure because 'Oh, MudClan's too quiet to stand up to us!' and then they'll take all the responsibility. If we tell all Clans, they will all try to take responsibility and that'll end in battles! Therefore, we keep it to ourselves, come to the Gathering all cured, and then tell them what the cure is."

"But-!" Hazelberry glared at him, silencing him.

She turned to Stonestar, who had stayed quiet the whole time. Her gaze was bright and almost convincing, her voice smooth and completely full of confidence. Owlpaw thought he saw a predatory light shimmering in their depths.

"What do you think, Stonestar?"

As the exhaling sigh left Stonestar, Owlpaw seemed as if he could not let go of his breath.

"You're right. We will keep this quiet."

•~•~•~•

Waking up to a faint, pale, white light leaking into the den, Owlpaw fluffed out his fur against the frigid wind that was swirling into the apprentice's den.

The apprentice's den was always cold since Owlpaw was the only one in the den, but today seemed really cold... He wasn't sure why. Confusion flitting inside of him, he stood up, and shock pulsed inside of him.

It'd snowed before, but never this much.

The pristine snow was piling up at the entrance of the den, slightly trailing into the den. Staring up at the wall of snow, he pawed lightly at the white substance. It instantly fell onto him and he leaped backward, a hiss escaping him. Trying to judge the size of the snow, he bunched his muscles, looking at the snow.

Jumping up and over the snow, he launched himself out of the apprentice's den. Watching as the snow fell into the den, he sighed,

as he sunk lower into the white, pristine snow outside.

Carefully padding his way to the fresh-kill pile, he peeked over the mound of snow that was slightly raised above the rest of the snow. He began to dig it out, hoping to find some prey underneath the ridiculous amount of snow.

A tuft of brown fur stuck out from the snow, and he tossed a few more chunks of snow away, finally clearing away the fresh-kill pile. A small mouse and a hare lay on the flat, cold ground. Nudging both pieces, he flinched away. They were freezing cold and seemed stale.

His claws were caked with snow, each crevice between each claw filled with the chilly substance. Licking his paw and drawing it lightly over his ear, he stood up, slowly clearing away a bit more of the snow in the camp before trotting out of camp.

Instantly, he slid across the icy, firm snow. It had hardened, unlike the fluffier snow in camp. His ears flicking, he attempted to steady himself. Unsheathing his claws and inching his way along the snow, he spotted a hare pecking at the tip of a rock that was sticking out of the snow.

Unsteadily, he crept towards it, his tail lashing as he slid towards the creature. Hurriedly bunching his muscles, he leaped for it, crashing into the rock. Falling down into the snow and right onto the hare, he crushed it in the snow. Hearing its faint, snuffling cries die out, he stood up and carefully balanced on the snow.

Reaching down and picking up the hare, he sniffed the air, not catching any other scents.

He flicked his tail, deciding to look for something else. Prowling around, he found himself quite far from the camp when he spotted a tiny shrew that was scuffling around in the snow. Dropping the hare, he realized he had just accidentally alerted the shrew.

Sliding towards it with great speed, it began to sprint away from him. He leaped for it and over calculated his jump, slipping past the shrew.

The shrew, he saw, was falling into the same issue as he. While letting out terrified yelps, it glided down towards Owlpaw. He clawed his way towards it, stretching to nip its neck. Getting up, he padded carefully towards his hare and stared down at it. The entire body of it was covered in frost as if it had suddenly gotten colder. It was slowly sinking into the snow.

Glancing up, his golden, warm eyes instantly darkened. The sky was dark, cloudy, and ominous.

Small, white flakes were falling from the sky, though it looked as if it were going to snow. A lot.

Grabbing the hare, he sprinted back to camp as fast as he could.

# || chapter twenty

The snow was falling hard now. Before, it was lightly falling, sprinkling itself wherever it wished to. Now, it didn't care where it fell. It just needed to fall. Anywhere.

And, depending on where you looked, a small tuft of dark brown fur, too. Owlpaw picked his way carefully over the heaps of freezing snow, his legs numb with cold. He could barely move them through the frigid substance, his paws sinking instantly down the moment he tried to move. The hare, still in his mouth, had snow crusted all over its fur. Its body was as cold as the snow, no longer the warm body of delectable prey it had been.

Owlpaw thought the snow couldn't fall any harder. He was wrong.

The clumps of snow that fell from the darkened sky seemed to purposefully whisk around him, dancing through the air with cold smiles upon their frosty faces. Suppressing a shiver, he shuffled his paws again to escape the snow that was crowding around his white paws. Warm golden gaze searching around, he spotted the camp's walls not far away.

A spark of relief pricked through him as he finally reached the camp. It was not an easy task to enter it, however. The snow had piled so high that only a bit of the wall was showing, and he had to go great lengths to not sink into the snow. It was a bit firmer here, and that was good. Perhaps his Clanmates were able to stand on it.

Upon entering, he saw nothing. Nobody was here. The entrances to the dens were slightly dug in, he could see, and the tops of them were fallen in. He scented the air, looking around, his entire body cold and aching. His ears flattened as he heard a small, quiet wail.

He followed the noise to where the nursery used to be. Dropping the hare, he peered into the fallen entrance of the den.

"Hello?" whispered Owlpaw.

The faint wail came again, more agonized and terrified than the last. It came again, and again, beginning to swirl up into the air with the snow.

He began to dig, his claws now unsheathed and now caked with frigid snow. He wasn't getting anywhere, and the yowls were getting fainter. Eventually, he plopped himself inside of the hole he'd created and found himself tumbling into the fallen nursery.

After clearing away a little bit of snow, he saw a familiar white pelt with black and gray speckles.

"Heronleap?"

Owlpaw rushed forwards, his eyes widened as he nudged the tom. His body was cold to the touch, and the apprentice recoiled.

"Heronleap! Heronleap? Are you okay?"

A small, strangled whimper came from the tom.

"Heronleap!" He exclaimed, instantly curling around the warrior. Though, he was shrugged off, as Heronleap wiggled away from Owlpaw. He tilted his head, confusion surging through him.

"Heronleap, let me warm you up..." He started, though the warrior had begun to speak.

"No... Owlpaw... l-let me go. I-I want to be with my f-family... Everyone I love is g-gone and I know I have... I know I have you guys but..." He had stopped, his hoarse voice cracking and choking itself.

"It's... not the s-same. I'm sorry... tell everyone I-I'm s-sorry and I w-wish I could s-say g-goodbye... goodbye..."

His voice stopped as a shudder ran down his spine. His body shivering for the last time, he fell still, his light amber eyes still sightlessly gazing ahead.

*StarClan, you've taken a whole family away from us. Who's next?*

Owlpaw's golden eyes closed, as he fluffed out his fur with a tiny sigh. Grief enveloped him, swallowing him up with a dark growl. He didn't want to move. He couldn't leave Heronleap here, could he? But he couldn't stay here either. There was no way his Clanmates would forgive him if he just left Heronleap here... would they? No. Of course not.

It was their Clanmate. But he couldn't drag Heronleap all around, looking for his Clanmates. Unless they were all lying, struggling to breathe with the snow crowding around them, in their own dens. No. That was impossible, too... right? Heronleap would've said something if his other Clanmates were still here.

Silently, he cursed himself for not asking about it. With a small, quiet, choked, pained sob, he curled up next to Heronleap.

Moments later, he heard a faint noise, strangled and quiet. Standing up, numb with cold and grief, he grasped Heronleap's scruff in his jaws. The tom's cold body was heavy, and despite that, Owlpaw was able to get out of the nursery.

Dragging the still body of Heronleap through the snow, Owlpaw gently placed him in a dip of snow. His entire being felt numb. Heronleap was dead. He was alone in the middle of a snowstorm with a hare that was as cold as the snow around him.

*The hare!*

His gaze surveying camp, he didn't see any sign of the piece of prey. Beginning to clear away some of the snow with his already snow-clogged claws, he soon spotted the tuft of its frosty fur. Dragging it out, he looked around the deserted camp.

The snow was still falling relentlessly, effortlessly drifting from the dark, cloudy sky and towards the ground where it settled in comfortably in a pile before smiling coldly at its friends, only to be covered by another snowflake.

Yanking the tuft of fur out, he dragged out the frigid body of the hare. Its eyes were crusted over with frost, the usual beadiness gone. He turned to the limp body of his Clanmate and slowly

dragged the piece of prey over.

His limbs barely able to move, he looked down and groomed his Clanmate's pelt. Soon, it was smooth and flat against the snow. His shoulders sagging, he put the hare next to Heronleap and nuzzled the tom's cold body.

"I'm sorry," Owlpaw whispered, and feeling as if the snow could swallow him up, he trudged out of camp.

# || chapter twenty one

"Owlpaw?"

The voice was soft and almost unbelieving. It came from a tortoiseshell she-cat, whose long fur was smooth. However, her gaze was dull, though it became a bit brighter as she saw him.

"Hazelberry..." Owlpaw managed to choke out, voice raw and hoarse. His paws were sore, painful, and frigid, a combination to make even the strongest leader shiver. His fur was fluffed up, though it was tinged with frost and his head had a lump of snow on it. Gaze dull, he staggered forwards and collapsed in front of her.

"Stonestar!" Hazelberry shouted, picking the apprentice up, and laying him gently on a flat rock. All around them were rocks, some pointy and sharp, and others flatter, though mostly all of them had snow on top, besides the one Owlpaw lay upon.

The dark-brown furred cat groaned, rolling over, hating the feeling of the smooth stone against his back. Soon, through a hazy vision, a plain gray tom teetered over him, his gaze hard as the rock that he was sitting on.

"Owlpaw, Owlpaw, we need you to be strong, okay?" Stonestar meowed fiercely, nudging the tom, to which he heard a small, almost irritated, outburst from Hazelberry, though he couldn't tell what she had said.

The apprentice let out a soft murmur that soundly vaguely like acceptance. He closed his eyes and felt warmness surround him. Opening his eyes, he spotted Sedgestorm and Flintpath sitting next to him, their tails curled slightly around him. As soon as the two realized he was looking at them, they instantly looked away, his mentor's shoulders sagging immediately.

"Now, Owlpaw, Hazelberry wants you to eat something first." Stonestar's voice resounded in his ears again, and as he looked

towards his voice, he spotted a mouse.

Owlpaw shook his head, "No... you.. should have it..."

Stonestar lashed his tail, his gaze glittering. "Eat, Owlpaw. I have..." he stopped, and continued uncertainly, "I have lives left. You have one."

Flattening his ears, the apprentice quickly ate the piece of prey with a few swift bites.

"Now have these," Hazelberry pushed forwards a pawful of herbs.

He ate those, too.

Stonestar stepped forwards, "Now, I have a few questions for you... Just answer to the best of your ability... okay?" Owlpaw nodded.

Sedgestorm whispered, "We were so worried about you, Owlpaw..." He didn't turn back to face his apprentice, voice barely audible. Flintpath didn't speak.

A silence lapsed between them, accented with awkwardness and solemnity.

"Where did you go before it started to snow?" asked Stonestar, finally breaking the silence.

"Well... I wanted to hunt for the Cl-Clan... so I went out..." Owlpaw blinked, vision growing slightly clearer after eating the herbs, "I know I should've asked for permission," he added hurriedly, "But I just wanted to come back with the hare I caught."

Stonestar's gaze narrowed. "So you came back to camp after you caught a hare? Where is it?"

Owlpaw cleared his throat, shaking his head, "I..."

Flintpath's voice suddenly grew louder, though it was soft and scared. "Where is Heronleap..?"

"He's dead..." Instantly, silence filled the space between them as if

they didn't believe him. The apprentice knew he couldn't skimp over what had actually happened. Gaze dropping, he continued, "I'm so sorry, I should've tried harder to save him... I dug down into the fallen nur-nursery where I heard cries and I tried to save him but he... he said he wanted to be with his family. And then he said that we were family too but it just wasn't the same... He said... He said he was sorry..."

Flintpath let out a small, broken wail.

"I'm so sorry..." Owlpaw whispered, and watched as Hazelberry turned away, neck fur beginning to rise. Sedgestorm sunk to the ground, green gaze dark and grief-stricken. Stonestar simply looked at the ground, eyes shadowed.

"And I buried the hare with him."

All around him swarmed grief and guilt. Everyone looked unhappy as ever; gazes dark, ears flattened, tails bushed. It still snowed, though the sky seemed to turn darker, releasing more snow upon the cold world beneath it. Owlpaw couldn't have been more upset if he tried.

*I should've tried harder, I should've tried harder!* Owlpaw shouted furiously at himself, claws unsheathing and scraping against the smooth, flat rock. He flinched at the horrific noise it made and instantly retracted his claws.

"We need to go from here." Stonestar murmured, "It's not safe."

Hazelberry sighed, clearly irritated, though the she-cat did not speak or voice her opinion, which surprised Owlpaw.

"We all should rest..." Owlpaw murmured, to which everyone seemed to collectively nod.

"I'm not tired, though," Hazelberry interjected, blinking.

"I am," snapped Owlpaw. His voice wavered slightly as he spoke to the she-cat.

Hazelberry lashed her tail. "Then you can sleep and the rest of us

can come up with an idea of what to do."

"But that's not fair. I'm part of this Clan, too, and my opinions matter."

Hazelberry laid her tail on his shoulders and he flinched away, though she didn't remove her tail.

"We know you're a part of the Clan. We're not denying you a place in our Clan, or denying yo your opinion. Just... let *us* deal with it, Owlpaw. We'll make sure you're safe." She meowed smoothly, her voice dripping with honey-covered venom that the apprentice instantly detected.

Owlpaw growled, thinking, *I didn't doubt you'd make sure I'm safe.*

"That's... not really fair." Sedgestorm agreed. "Owlpaw is right... He is a vital part of our Clan. For all we know, he's the *future* of whatever we have left after the sickness."

Flintpath had been silent for a long time, letting out lonesome whimpers every now and then, though now he raised his head and spoke in a quiet tone of voice;

"I agree. It's not fair at all. He just... he literally just watched Heronleap die."

A long silence stretched between them and Owlpaw's vision blurred. Uncomfortably, he shifted his position, shoulders sagging.

"See?" Hazelberry cooed sweetly, nudging him to lay down, "He's tired. Let him sleep."

Owlpaw laid down reluctantly, eyes already closing as he felt exhaustion envelop him. It swirled in the very depths of his being, settling inside of him and almost forcing him to sleep.

He heard pawsteps, and then voices, faint and quiet, though they were definitely talking about him. He could tell from the sharp, accented way Stonestar's familiar tone spoke about him, Hazelberry's flat remarks and cooing replies, Sedgestorm's reasoning voice, and Flintpath's agreeable, though insistent points.

The apprentice fell asleep on the cold, hard, uncomfortable, flat, slate-colored rock.

# || chapter twenty two

"Get up, Owlpaw."

"Huh...?"

The apprentice shook his head, feeling energy race through his limbs. Opening his golden eyes, he blinked sleepiness out of his gaze and looked up to the cat who was speaking to him.

It was Hazelberry. Behind her was a cluster of the rest of his Clanmates, and behind them were mounds and mounds of snow, rising up over the plains and laying lightly on the tips of sharp, slate-colored rocks.

"How are you feeling?" She asked, gaze bright.

Flicking an ear, he meowed, "Energetic. Why?"

She nodded to herself. "We started testing herbs on cats yesterday. Let me listen to your breathing," she put an ear to his flank, instructing, "Breathe, Owlpaw."

He breathed in and out, his flanks rising up and down evenly, though he was shocked. Did Hazelberry really think it was a good idea to test herbs on cats in the middle of a snowstorm?

She lightly patted him on his flank and then his shoulders.

"Can you move around for me?" she asked.

He nodded, stretching out his limbs.

The medicine cat frowned, "Well, that's not the herb." She muttered and backed away, returning to their other Clanmates. Her accented, sharp tone drifted to the apprentice.

He stood up, quickly smoothing his fur down and licking out the snow. Coldness pulsed around him but energy sloshed inside of him,

tail lashing absently. Leaping off the rock he laid on, the apprentice padded over to where the rest of his Clan was. He sunk into the snow and, hissing, he jumped up, carefully weighing himself on the soft snow. Realizing that it had stopped snowing, he sighed in relief. The sky was clear and a pale, leaf-bare sun rose slowly into the sky as if working very hard to melt the ridiculous amount of snow.

"So? What are we doing?" Owlpaw queried, gaze sweeping around the cats.

"Well, it's a long story. But Hazelberry can explain it," Stonestar meowed, looking at the she-cat, who growled irritably and lashed her tail.

"Fine, fine," she complied and took a deep breath, "Last night we decided it's probably safer to stay in our territory. The other Clans would likely be angry at us for going into their territory. However, the other Clans have... probably lost cats, just like us. This caused an issue. Should we go to talk with the other Clans or stay here?

"It's certainly dangerous to go with the other Clans. They could figure out that we're already testing herbs on cats, which I've already distributed to some of us. Though more cats are usually better, for warmth purposes. Prey could definitely be an issue though... Considering we can't get a lot of prey for ourselves in the first place.

"Sedgestorm and Flintpath wanted to go to the other Clans, but I didn't. Stonestar didn't know what to do, and eventually, we settled on staying here."

Flintpath seemed as if he wanted to interject, but he didn't. Sedgestorm seemed to be dealing with a similar issue.

"We're going to go back to camp now," Stonestar meowed, voice wavering slightly as if he didn't want to. Owlpaw nodded uncertainly.

"What about Heronleap...?" asked Flintpath quietly, "Are we going to just leave him to rot in the snow or are we going to properly bury him?"

Owlpaw felt a little hurt. *I couldn't have buried him better if I tried... I was exhausted and I wanted to sleep.* The apprentice spotted Hazelberry turning away and lashing her tail. He tilted his head as if she could see him.

"We'll need to wait for the snow to melt," muttered Hazelberry, "Dragging Heronleap out of the hole Owlpaw put him in will be nearly impossible."

"Sorry," Owlpaw mewed quietly, shame burning within him.

Stonestar's gaze suddenly brightened, ear twitching, "Wait, wait, didn't you bury a rabbit with him?"

Owlpaw nodded.

"We can eat that!" exclaimed Sedgestorm, completely cutting off his leader, whiskers flicking excitedly.

"You mean *I* can eat that?" snapped Hazelberry, "I've gone so long without food it feels like I'm about to die!"

Sedgestorm's eyes narrowed, "I caught the mouse earlier and Flintpath got you the thrush to share with Stonestar."

"Fine, then, take this!" Hazelberry disappeared into the snow banks, and a moment later she returned, holding a clump of withered leaves.

Owlpaw interjected, "Wait, aren't you trying out herbs on everyone? What if that one conflicts with the one you're testing on him?"

Hazelberry seemed to mull this over. Her gaze glittering with scorn, she snapped, "Well then, looks like you'll have to go hungry, Sedgestorm."

Stonestar interrupted, "Come on, we're going back to camp."

Owlpaw glanced at Sedgestorm, guilt swarming inside of him. Hazelberry quickly disappeared over the rise and returned with another mouthful of herbs, her eyes darting around and spotting Stonestar. The apprentice watched as Hazelberry pushed in front of

Stonestar confidently and strolled away.

He padded over to Sedgestorm and Flintpath, who both were whispering to each other as they walked along behind Hazelberry and Stonestar, their heads tilted towards each other.

"... unfair!" Owlpaw caught the end of Sedgestorm's growl.

"What's unfair?" Owlpaw asked and they both seemed to jump a little as if they didn't expect him to be there.

Flintpath looked away, though he muttered, "Hazelberry. Hazelberry's unfair."

"She's going to starve us," Sedgestorm grumbled, "I could eat a bear right about now. She already *had* prey this morning. Flintpath and I went out together, and we caught two pieces of prey. A mouse and a plump thrush. Hazelberry ate *all* of the thrush. I think Stonestar had *one b*ite, or maybe a tiny nibble after the first bite. But she ate an entire thrush and Stonestar didn't do anything about it!"

Flintpath hissed crossly, stomping his paw and accidentally sinking into the snow. Yelping, he attempted to get out, though it didn't work. He sunk deeper into the frigid snow. Owlpaw glanced ahead of him, where Hazelberry was still walking forwards and where Stonestar was looking back. The plain gray tom didn't do anything. Owlpaw's gaze grew as sharp as flint, now clearly vexed.

Looking back, he saw that Sedgestorm had a grip on Flintpath, but couldn't get him out. The apprentice carefully padded around the hole, sure not to fall in, and pushed Flintpath's back as Sedgestorm pulled from the front. Hoping he hadn't hurt the tom when he pushed on his back, he watched as the tom hopped his way out and broke into a light run to get away. Owlpaw and Sedgestorm followed, nervousness still pulsing inside of Owlpaw.

"Come on, slowpokes," called Hazelberry over her shoulder, though Owlpaw could not detect a teasing tone in her voice.

The three cats shared an irritated glance and sped up, trotting behind the two cats in the front.

Scenting the air out of habit, Owlpaw caught the scent of a hare, to his surprise. *Hares are still around? I thought they'd be gone by now... It's too cold for them to survive... It's probably stale or just dead.*

He wasn't the only one who smelled it, for Flintpath and Sedgestorm had stalked off in the direction of the whiff. Hazelberry and Stonestar had not noticed. Owlpaw padded on and, pricking his ear, he heard a faint squeal.

The two warriors came dashing over a snow-covered slope, the hare jerking violently with the swinging of Flintpath's jaw.

"Ooh, is that for me?" Hazelberry's voice was smooth as honey.

Anger swirled inside of Owlpaw.

"No. It's for me, Sedgestorm, and Stonestar," asserted Flintpath.

Hazelberry seemed briefly furious, though the emotion flushed out of her composure a moment later, a sweet, kind, almost mocking smile appearing on her brightened face.

"Well, we aren't eating now. You'll have to wait!" she purred, turning around and strolling off.

# || chapter twenty three

"There's camp..." muttered Sedgestorm. Flintpath nodded beside him, the hare in his jaws swinging as his head moved. Owlpaw thought the toms would've been happier. He was wrong.

Before Stonestar spoke, Hazelberry whisked her tail around the snowy ground.

"We're back at camp," Hazelberry announced, speaking through her bundle of herbs, "And it'll have to be cleared out. If we want to live here again, the snow will need to be removed. We'll remove the snow from my den first and my den will be rebuilt first," The medicine cat ordered, her gaze sweeping the snowy camp.

Sedgestorm frowned, picking at the camp wall; he could easily reach it with the snow so high. "That'll take a long time... We need to build the camp walls first and dens too, we can't just leave them to be ruined while we clear snow."

"Well, that's too bad. My den will be rebuilt first," she narrowed her eyes.

Flintpath's whiskers twitched irritably as he let out an accidental wheeze, "So you expect us to sleep in an unbuilt, ruined, cold clump of branches until *your* den is built?"

She smiled sweetly, giving a quick nod, "Yes."

Owlpaw glanced at Stonestar, desperation glittering in his warm, golden gaze. *You can't just keep letting this happen!* He thought, *Stonestar, please? You're the leader! You can stop this! You can solve this problem! You're letting her take over your job, Stonestar... That's not okay. Don't you care?*

Stonestar met Owlpaw's gaze. The leader's shadowed eyes darted away.

"Hazelberry, no," Stonestar whispered, voice wavering and quiet.

The medicine cat had already padded off into camp, tail raised as if motioning for them to follow her. Sedgestorm and Flintpath clustered closer to Owlpaw as if protecting him, their gazes razor-sharp and lit up. Stonestar looked nervously to where Hazelberry was padding away, whiskers quivering.

As she realized nobody was following, her head snapped around, spotting the four cats standing tall at the entrance. Confusion swirled in her gaze, though it disappeared a moment later as she realized they were not padding after her. Growling, she stalked back over. Her tail lashed crossly, her bright, irritated gaze surveying the cats.

"What's wrong with you all? Hurry up, my herbs are going to wilt!" snapped the medicine cat.

Owlpaw felt something swirl inside of him.

Sedgestorm narrowed his eyes.

Flintpath's gray fur rose.

Stonestar looked away, his gaze dark.

"Nothing," murmured Stonestar, nudging the cats forward, "Come on."

Hazelberry hissed something under her breath, quickly padding back to the center of camp.

Owlpaw felt fury flit inside of him, washing onto him like waves. He stalked forwards, irritation bright in his gaze. Gazing around camp, he began to clear away the snow.

After a brief moment, Stonestar, Sedgestorm, and Flintpath had joined him, slowly getting rid of the snow near the medicine cat's den. The camp wall was still threaded with snow and Hazelberry was inside of her den.

The hare was sitting at the entrance to the camp, which was finally

cleared away of snow. Hazelberry's den, after a long time, was cleared of snow and rebuilt. The medicine cat had snapped at them to hurry up because she "was cold". Sedgestorm had growled and Flintpath had flattened his ears.

After that, the rest of the camp was cleared of snow. The camp walls were completely ridden of snow. In some places, the cats had needed to completely reposition the walls so they would stand up correctly. After being told by Hazelberry that the wall needed to be completely redone in one spot, Sedgestorm had left to gather branches and grasses. The edges of camp still had lumps and mounds of the chilly, white substance, but the four working cats did not care. Their bones ached. Their paws were clumped with snow and limp with exhaustion. Their minds were as numb as their legs.

The cats had not found Heronleap when they were clearing the snow and they did not find the prey buried with him.

Owlpaw stumbled away from the edge of camp, still not used to having firm ground beneath his now-tired paws. He glanced longingly at the hare, pangs of hunger shaking him. Looking around, he spotted Sedgestorm curled up at the entrance to the fallen warrior's den. Flintpath was staggering towards the hare. The apprentice padded towards the hare and snagged it between his jaws.

"Share," implored Flintpath, his gaze full of hunger and exhaustion. His body shook as he stood up unsteadily.

Stonestar was sitting next to Sedgestorm, his shoulders sagging and gaze as dark as the night sky above them.

Owlpaw hobbled over, barely able to stand. He laid the prey down in front of the two and Flintpath quickly wobbled over to sit down, paws dragging along the ground.

"You three can eat first," whispered Owlpaw, voice broken and raspy.

Sedgestorm lifted his head. The tom looked as if he was about to collapse of pure exhaustion. He took a grateful two bites and

pushed it to Stonestar. The leader took three bites, though one was smaller than the rest. Flintpath finished it up in two bites. As Owlpaw watched, black spots pricked at the edges of his vision.

"Sorry..." wheezed Flintpath, his gaze truly apologetic despite his raspy, almost inaudible, tone. The apprentice faintly heard Hazelberry's angry pawsteps and her snappy tone beginning to approach and he felt as if he was more tired than the moment before.

Owlpaw barely nodded, staggering away, his entire being sagging with exhaustion and hunger. His paws shook as he lifted them and placed them down. Spotting the fallen apprentice's den, he wiggled his way under the branches, standing up unsteadily under the den. The branches flattened on his back and he weakly pushed some of them away into a little pile. His paws throbbed and he felt as if he could not move.

He collapsed, darkness washing over his vision and he felt his limbs go limp before feeling removed from the world.

# || chapter twenty four

The voices were raspy and concerned, quiet and nervous, soft and anxious. One was sharp and furious, accented and punctual, swift and strong. There was four of them. One sounded farther away than the others, and therefore quieter, though that did not diminish the fact that each had a special quality to it.

One of them was quiet. Its sounds were often barely audible above the other timbres, though none of the closer three were loud in the first place. It made good points and reasonable arguments, though its ideas were often blinded by feeling and instinct.

A different voice was raspy. It often shook when it rose above the other tones. The voice was often a reasoning tone in the two other voices, though occasionally it would snap and crumble, falling prey to the anxiety and softness of the other two voices. This timbre would also occasionally disappear for a time and return even more perturbed than before.

The third voice was always nervous. Before it had been serene and collected, though now it wobbled uncertainly on the tones of itself. The voice was not unconfident or shy - never, ever unconfident or shy - simply just anxious. It was weary and afraid it would make a mistake, though it was reasonable and would often join, agreeably, with the quiet voice.

The last voice was sharp. It always had a furious, though faint, reply to the quieter, more anxious, tones. It was farther away than the original three, though this did not deter it from making an irritated comment or a loud shout in reply to the other three. It often controlled the raspier voice, who would crumble underneath the sharp tone and neither of the other voices would say too much about it.

Owlpaw could not tell who was saying what, or who each tone belonged to, but that did not matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

Everything was just gone. There was nothing. Everything, everyone... All gone. Except for the voices. They stayed.

He could not feel anything or understand anything that was going on. It was just gone; he simply was in a place where there was nothing. It was not black or white or gray. It was not fathomable to explain where he was because he could not understand it. It was impossible to describe where he was.

The apprentice could not explain it. There was just nothing. All he could sense was himself.

Every now and then he could feel a small poke or nudge from somewhere. It was impossible to explain where that came from. He could just feel a tugging from somewhere that was urging him to get out and whenever he tried, he would just end up more exhausted than he already was.

The voices often grew clear when he tried to get out, no longer a strange slur of words. He could often hear his own name highlighted when he tried to escape the world of nothingness but he would always fall back to the emptiness.

After a while, it just grew boring. There was simply nothing. He could not feel anything around him or interact with his empty environment. Once, he had questioned if this was just made up in his mind and everything instantly just swirled around him. Colors, cats, prey, scents, blood, light, darkness, different voices, loud noises, quiet noises, nudges from his left, a shove from his right... Everything from every direction.

Instantly, he stopped thinking about it and everything went back to, dare he say it, normal.

He wanted to know how long he had been in this... place for. It felt like he had spent fifty cycles of the world here, each cycle slower and more empty and boring than the last.

No matter how long it seemed, the voices never left. The voices did not change over time or alter their slurred ideas. It was the same four voices.

One day, Owlpaw felt and smelled something strange. It was indescribable. He could not feel or smell in the first place, so it was already intriguing.

His chest heaving, he opened his eyes and shot up from wherever he was.

Instantly, he recognized where he was.

The medicine cat's den.

In the air, he could detect the fresh smells of his Clanmates; Stonestar, Sedgestorm, Flintpath, and Hazelberry, the last accompanied by sharp and sweet smells. A thick smell filled the air and the apprentice found it difficult to breathe. The apprentice's golden gaze swept the den, the branches and grasses making up the walls he remembered building.

Putting his head on his paws, he realized that he was in the sick-cat part of the den. The herbs were not near him and the nest he was sitting in was made of dry moss, soft grasses, and some extra little flowers and leaves. A few feathers poked out of the nest, cuddling close to Owlpaw.

*I don't want to close my eyes... What if I'm sucked back into the world I was in before?*

He waited for the familiar exhaustion to return, but the feeling did not slosh back into his paws.

Stretching, he gazed around the den again, his golden gaze critical. *Maybe I can go hunt.* He thought and flattened his ears, twitching his whiskers and flicking his tail. Stretching his paws and moving around a bit, he glanced at the entrance, where moonlight filtered into the entrance. He stood up and unsteadily padded out.

His Clanmates were standing in the center of the camp, their fur slightly bristling. He recognized Stonestar's plain gray pelt next to Hazelberry's tortoiseshell fur. Anxiously, he padded up to them, standing to the left of Sedgestorm and observing Flintpath and Sedgestorm.

Both warriors seemed upset. Owlpaw had already guessed what it was about, but he wasn't about to reveal himself. He was surprised that they hadn't seen him yet. Then, as he shifted, he realized Sedgestorm's gaze had focused on him.

"Owlpaw!" Sedgestorm screeched, "Oh my StarClan, Owlpaw, I was so... worried... Owlpaw, Owlpaw... oh my StarClan..." His voice instantly grew quieter and softer as he approached the apprentice, his gaze studying Owlpaw's expression.

"We were all worried..." whispered Flintpath, who was now standing next to his mentor. His gaze was trained carefully on Owlpaw as if he expected the tom to dissipate into thin air.

Owlpaw felt his fur grow warm at the feeling of pairs of eyes on his dark brown pelt. The stars above his head seemed to stare at him, too, and the moon seemed to glance in his direction as he murmured, "I'm sorry."

# || chapter twenty five

"It's not your fault, Owlpaw..." Sedgestorm instantly replied, emotions still clearly glittering in his gaze, "It's Hazelberry's."

The she-cat broke in, clearly angry, "Excuse me? Who insisted they keep working?"

"Excuse *me*," Owlpaw interrupted, "But I very distinctly recall you saying that we were not to stop until we were finished with our work. You would be wrong and it would be most definitely your fault that I passed out."

Hazelberry narrowed her eyes, "Oh really? Do you have proof?"

The apprentice gave her a harsh glare, "Uh, no, what do you think, I ask StarClan to record everything that happens?" The she-cat winced.

"Then it didn't happen," she meowed, flicking her tail, "Anyways... we have a lot to fill you in on."

"And *I'm* explaining it," interjected Flintpath, glancing at Sedgestorm, who added;

"Me too."

"If you insist," the medicine cat scoffed.

Flintpath lifted his head, "After Sedgestorm found you, he called me over... and..." the warrior stopped, looking away. He took a deep breath, and continued, "We carried you over to Hazelberry's den, where she snapped-"

"I did not!" the tortoiseshell hissed, stomping her paw furiously.

"-at us and took you to her den," resumed Flintpath, ignoring the she-cat, "Pretty much, after that, we all fell asleep wherever and we woke up the next day. Right away, I went hunting and sort of

rebuilt the dens. Hazelberry asked us how we were feeling since she did test more herbs on us, and we deduced that the herbs she tested this time were not the cure, either."

Sedgestorm had glanced at Flintpath as if asking if he could continue. The warrior nodded.

"After that, we visited you and... and... stayed with you for a bit," Owlpaw's mentor murmured, "I decided to go and see if the snow had melted and it had, though not a lot. I did find a plump rabbit though, which was nice, and I marked some borders as well. The Clans' borders were not marked recently, besides ours, of course. I reported this to Stonestar and we fear something has happened to them..." the warrior trailed off.

Flintpath picked up where he had stopped, "I wanted to go and see if the Clans were okay, but Hazelberry did not, and she convinced Stonestar soon after it was not a good idea."

"Stonestar agreed with me! I did not need to convince him," chimed the medicine cat sharply, to which the leader visibly grew more uncomfortable, "Isn't that right, Stonestar?"

The leader looked away, ears flattening and gaze darkening, "Y-yes, Hazelberry."

Hazelberry pricked her ear, humming, "Oh, what did you say-?"

"So we didn't leave," snapped Flintpath, his neck fur rising, "And we actually had that entire conversation in the medicine cat's den, with you..." Flintpath's voice had quieted.

"That's basically it," growled Hazelberry before the warrior could continue, "Now tell us what *you* saw, Owlpaw."

As the spotlight switched onto the apprentice, Owlpaw felt all pairs of eyes bore into his dark brown pelt. He curled his tail over his white paws.

"Okay, so..."

The apprentice began to explain everything he'd been able to see -

rather, not see - and how he'd heard the four voices. Instantly, Hazelberry had assumed that the voices were each of the cats. Owlpaw had just shrugged it off and explained the rest, how he was unable to see or do anything, how he tried to escape, and about the many noises, sounds, feelings, and nudges from when he had questioned if it was made up.

"Well, I guess that herb didn't work," muttered Hazelberry.

Outrage surged inside Owlpaw as he snarled furiously, "What? You tested an herb on me and that's what it did?!"

Sedgestorm and Flintpath looked just as enraged.

The medicine cat purred, "Oh, no, well... Yes, I tested an herb on you earlier. You said in the morning it made you energetic, but I suppose it had some rather... deadly after-effects. But it's fine now since you're okay," she meowed, her gaze bright. She laid her tail on Owlpaw's shoulders and he flinched. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

"Glad you all agree," she continued, "Now, we need to test more herbs, and we only have a few more left. There's four, in fact, so we could easily test the remainder. Though, I'm sure three of them won't do anything. Rosemary, lavender, and mint all just hide the scent of death. They each have some healing qualities but they're useless anyway. The last one would be... uh... burnet, yes, burnet."

Hazelberry excused herself and disappeared into the medicine cat's den and Owlpaw could hear shuffling of paws and reorganization of herbs. She returned with a pawful of each herb, their scents overwhelming.

"So, who wants each herb?" Hazelberry laid each herb bundle on the ground and after nobody spoke, she nudged the burnet bundle to Stonestar, the mint bundle to Owlpaw, the lavender bundle to Sedgestorm, and the rosemary bundle to Flintpath.

"Tell me if you start to feel a bit strange, or you feel as if breathing is easier," she meowed, adding, "And make sure to actually eat the herbs. If you don't... You're dooming us all."

Owlpaw looked down at the bundle with a disgusted look in his eyes. Despite not wanting to, he lapped up the mint, the sharp, distinct flavor instantly spreading over his tongue. Shivering, he snapped his jaws as he breathed in sharply. Glancing at the other cats, he spotted Sedgestorm having a similar issue with his lavender bundle.

Flintpath and Stonestar seemed fine. The warrior licked his jaws after he had eaten his bundle, and trudged back to the warriors' den, which was built completely.

In a moment, he realized the camp was reconstructed.

Hunger gnawing at his belly, he padded slowly to the apprentice's den. It was no longer a little structure of branches and grasses; now, it was a pre-made bush. A lot of branches, brush, and grass was woven together to make up the small den. Right in the middle of the den was a little circle of moss and grass. The den was now sized appropriately, for only one or two cats.

Owlpaw smiled slightly at the sight of the den and the tom crawled in, ducking under as he carefully squeezed through. The branches scraped his dark brown pelt as he passed by. The entrance was not big. It was sized nicely for an apprentice. He laid down in the nest and shifted around a bit, finding the walls closed in so much a bit strange, compared to the big den.

Regardless, he fell asleep.

# || chapter twenty six

Sunlight woke Owlpaw.

The branches were woven thickly together, grasses put delicately into the areas where too much sun would stream through. Though, little holes and small pinpricks of light speckled into the den, creating a warm patch on Owlpaw's dark brown fur. Warmth spread through him as he glanced up and flinching. His eyes were not adjusted to the light. Now that he thought about it, the sunlight wasn't even that bright; the night before had just been very dark.

He stood up and stretched, giving his dark brown pelt a quick washing. His warm golden eyes glanced out of the den. For the first time in a long time, he felt well rested and fine. Breathing in the sharp, cold air of leaf-bare, he squeezed through the entrance of the den, squinting as he gazed around camp.

Instantly, he spotted Sedgestorm, Flintpath, Hazelberry, and Stonestar all chatting. Their demeanors appeared brighter than he'd seen them. Well, not Hazelberry's. Curious, he trotted over.

"Owlpaw, you're finally awake," Stonestar meowed, nodding a greeting at the apprentice.

"Yeah, I am... is there a problem? Should I have been up earlier...?" Owlpaw asked.

Flintpath looked as if he were about to explode. His tail was bushed up.

Hazelberry glanced at the tom doubtfully, sighing, "He can tell you."

"Rosemary is the cure!" trilled Flintpath, "A few days ago, I was wheezing a lot and my chest felt tight... Hazelberry told me that I was most likely getting sick and she said there was nothing we could do. After she tested the rosemary on me, she said I was cured, and that meant that the rosemary was the cure too! Here, we saved

a bundle to get rid of any sickness you have," the warrior nudged a small bundle of the herb to Owlpaw's white paws, continuing, "We have so much of rosemary because it's a death herb and we have so much of it stocked up... Sedgestorm and I are going to go and tell the other Clans soon, and we'll likely bring some of the rosemary to share with them in case they don't have any."

Owlpaw studied the herb, all kinds of emotions swirling inside of him. It had sharp edges and it looked like a pine needle. Suddenly, the memory of the morning when the herb told him to go to the Moonpool pricked freshly into his mind.

"That's the herb that came to me!" He exclaimed, turning the bundle over.

"Of course, of course..." murmured Stonestar.

Owlpaw ate some of the stalks swiftly. Swallowing the rest of the bundle up with a quick motion, he gazed around. The entire camp seemed to be a little happier.

"So... now what...?" asked Owlpaw.

Hazelberry was muttering something angrily to herself, though as Owlpaw spoke, she stopped.

"Hunt? Patrol?" she suggested.

Owlpaw huffed, "I want to go tell the other Clans too."

"Well, I'm hungry, and I cannot hunt. Stonestar is a leader, he has better things to do, and Sedgestorm and Flintpath are going to tell the other Clans. Looks like you're staying," growled Hazelberry, eyes narrowed.

"Please?" Owlpaw stared meaningfully at Stonestar.

"If Hazelberry says no... then I say no..." whispered Stonestar, clearly nervous. Hazelberry inched her way over to the leader, curling her tail around him. The plain gray tom flinched as she pressed against him.

Owlpaw couldn't believe his ears, "I... What? I can't go?"

"No, you can't!" hissed Hazelberry, "Now go hunt!"

"Fine," the apprentice spat, though his voice was not angry. He glanced at Sedgestorm and Flintpath, who were slowly shuffling away towards the entrance. Owlpaw rushed past them, his fur brushing against Flintpath's, as he shoved his way into the territory.

A cold wind curled around Owlpaw as the apprentice scented the air.

*This is going to be a long day.*

^~^~^~^

Owlpaw scraped away snow and dirt from a mound that he'd made earlier, revealing a small mouse.

Picking the creature up, he hooked it on his claw, shifting the rabbit that was clenched between his jaws. He had been lucky to find both pieces of prey in the first place. The apprentice could already picture what would happen when he returned with the rabbit.

Shivering, the tom began to head back to camp. The sun had drifted behind a group of clouds, leaving the world dark. The clouds were not dark, though they weren't exactly fluffy and happy either. The sky had started to turn peachy-pink, the color spreading quicker than a forest fire.

Soon, he came upon the camp. Jumping lightly over a lump of snow, he entered the camp.

Owlpaw glanced around. Nobody was outside of their dens and Sedgestorm and Flintpath were definitely not back yet. Hunger pricked at his belly as he dropped off both pieces of prey in the pile. Both of his catches sat atop a frost-covered, stale-looking vole.

With a huff, he pulled the vole out of the pile and took a bite of it. The stale creature's meat did not taste delicious and the frost that covered its pelt was not pleasant, however, the feeling of eating something forced Owlpaw to finish it off. He buried the bones of the

creature, wholly aware that he had not been told he could eat. Patting the earth a little bit better over its bones, he glanced at the sky.

Assuming Hazelberry and Stonestar were both in their dens, Owlpaw padded into his own den, not used to the small entrance. He squeezed past the branches, which relentlessly scraped his pelt as he brushed by. Hissing, the tom pushed forwards and tumbled into his nest.

He situated himself as darkness began to settle around him. The sky was now black with speckles of light and a moon rose slowly up into the dark sky. It barely lit up the camp, much less the den.

Darkness surrounded him, shrouding the twitching of his tail and the flicking of his ear. He was too impatient. Sedgestorm and Flintpath needed to come back soon... They couldn't stay at the other Clans' camps; they were needed here.

Owlpaw tried to stay awake to greet them when they returned, but the tom found himself slipping into slumber.

# || chapter twenty seven

As the sun rose, so did Owlpaw.

The sun did not provide too much light, especially due to the fact that it was leaf-bare. Clouds flitted their way across the sky, blocking out the minimal light the sun gave. The apprentice's den had been dark for a while, but as the sun rose to sit on the horizon, Owlpaw had been blinded by a ray of light that entered the den.

Shaking out his fur, he gazed around camp, golden eyes critical. Scenting the air, he was surprised and a little worried to catch no scents of Sedgestorm or Flintpath.

*I thought they would be back by now,* he thought with a frown, *Sedgestorm and Flintpath probably just stayed at one of the camps, or maybe even helped rebuild one. I'm sure they're fine; they're smart, they wouldn't get in too much trouble.*

Tying his thoughts to a close, he glanced at the fresh-kill pile. It was empty. He sighed and padded out of camp.

A cold wind swirled around the apprentice, reminding him of the season that hung over everything he had done. It curled around his paws, twisting itself around his tail, and plopped itself on his head with a satisfied *whoosh*.

Lifting his muzzle into the air, he tried to catch a scent of any prey. Catching the fresh scent of a rabbit, he dashed after the scent, pulling himself to an abrupt stop as he spotted the creature with another rabbit.

Smirking to himself, Owlpaw slowly crept forwards, keeping his pawsteps even. The snow crunched quietly under his paws and he mentally cursed, slowly unsheathing his claws. Unfortunately, it made a small crackling noise as he sunk them into the snow and both rabbits' heads shot into the air, their heads swiveling around.

Hissing, Owlpaw leaped forwards, sinking his teeth into the back of one of the rabbits. The other had dashed off with a squeal. Owlpaw launched himself after the other rabbit, the other one violently swinging in his jaws. Finally catching up with the other rabbit, he vaulted himself towards it, his claw sinking into its back. The creature let out an ear-shattering scream as Owlpaw dropped the other rabbit and sunk his teeth into its back. Warm, sticky blood flowed freely into his mouth.

With a distasteful flick of his whiskers, he spat out some of the blood and licked his jaws clean.

Glancing down at both pieces of prey, he scented the air and, of course, caught the stench of death and metallic blood. Shivering, he slowly backed away and scented again, catching the scent of a mouse. Quickly, he padded back over, scraped some snow over the rabbits, and then dashed off in the direction of the mouse.

*If I can bring back at least three pieces of prey... Maybe I can have one all to myself!* Owlpaw thought excitedly, his tail lashing at the prospect of sinking his teeth into a delicious, freshly caught piece of prey - all for himself.

He soon spotted the mouse picking at something at the base of a rock. Carefully making his way over the snow, he crept forwards. Rocking lightly on his paws, he waited for the perfect moment.

Suddenly, the mouse looked up and dashed off.

*What?*

Owlpaw let out an irritated hiss before springing after it, though he tripped over a tuft of grass that poked out of the snow and fell head-first into the snow. He jerked his head up and stumbled backward clumsily until he hit his head on the rock.

Groaning, the tom rose to his paws and looked around. His vision spun slightly, the sky blurry above his head. Shaking his head, he began to walk to where his rabbits were buried earlier.

He tripped halfway there.

Getting up again, he pressed each paw down as he walked, careful not to trip or fall. Finally, he came upon the mound. Digging up the prey, he grabbed them both and gripped them firmly between his jaws.

He swished his tail as he entered the camp and gazed around. Sedgestorm and Flintpath didn't appear to be here yet.

Sighing, Owlpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile and dropped his catches in the pile. Sitting down next to both pieces of prey, he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down.

*There's no way StarClan would get rid of both of them. There's no way. We already lost Heronleap, Meadowdapple, and their kits.* He hadn't thought of Meadowdapple and her kits in a long time, and a fresh pang of grief flitted through the tom. He wished the kind she-cat and her bouncy kits were still around. These thoughts reminded him of Hazelberry's accusation. Anger briefly stirred in his belly, but he forced it away. *I know Sedgestorm and Flintpath will be back soon. I know it.*

Opening his eyes, shock and anger flashed through him. Hazelberry was wordlessly dragging one of the rabbits away to her den. She grunted with the effort; clearly, she was not as strong as she used to be. Her tortoiseshell fur rippled with the effort of carrying the creature as she finally got it in the medicine cat's den.

Turning to see Stonestar emerge from the medicine cat's den, confusion swirled inside of him.

*Why was he in there? He's not sick... is he?*

Owlpaw surveyed the tom's state. He seemed to be limping, or at least not walking steadily. His gaze was dark and nervous as he picked the rabbit from the pile, taking a few bites. His movements were strangely stiff. He ate about half before pushing the remainder of the rabbit to where Owlpaw was.

Stonestar got up and padded away into the medicine cat's den.

Blinking, Owlpaw finished off the rest of the warm rabbit, savoring

its taste. He buried its bones soon after and curled his tail over his paws, gazing after where Stonestar had disappeared into the medicine cat's den.

Then, Sedgestorm and Flintpath walked into camp.

# || chapter twenty eight

"You're back!" Owlpaw exclaimed, leaping to his paws and dashing over. Though, his ears flattened as he observed their states.

Sedgestorm's eyes were darkened with grief. His shoulders sagged, his whiskers drooped, and his tail had fallen to the ground.

Flintpath scuffed his paw against the ground, looking as sad as ever. He looked as if he could sink into the ground at any moment and be swallowed up by horror and terror. His ears were pressed flat against his head.

"What happened?" Owlpaw asked tentatively, an ear flicking absently as he spoke.

"The other Clans are in deep trouble," murmured Sedgestorm gravely.

Owlpaw tilted his head, "The snowstorm?"

"Yes. PetalClan... they... PetalClan lost Sorrelflame, Quailnose, and Mousewhisker to the snowstorm. They were all trapped underneath a branch that fell. Finchtuft tried to save them, and Heatherstar dug at the tree, but it did not budge..."

The tom's gaze had flitted to the ground as he continued, "PetalClan's remaining cats are staying with PineClan... The forest in PineClan is so ravaged..." A shudder ran down his spine as he shook out his fur, "Almost every tree was fallen... Snow was as far as the eye could see, and there was remains of starved prey among the fallen pines. PineClan lost their camp and a sick Troutfur along with it. They had to move to PetalClan's new, make-shift camp. They're all starving and grieving for everything and everyone they've lost. We've had it so easy..." whispered Sedgestorm and suddenly the tom let out a wail of pure grief.

Flintpath looked at the sky, and then he mewed quietly, "SquirrelClan was still affected by it. Most of their trees had fallen and one even on their camp. The prey had scattered and now they're living off scraps. Nutgaze could barely walk, and Mossheart had contracted the sickness too. She was in the 'medicine cat's den' if you can even call that crude, new place part of their camp."

He took in a quiet breath, as if he, too, were still trying to process it all, and continued, "I gave them the herbs... but I fear Mossheart and Nutgaze were too far gone to be saved... I hope they're okay. They truly seemed as if they were being torn up from the inside... And not just from the sickness or because of the pain..."

Owlpaw felt as if a wave was knocking him over. It shoved relentlessly at his paws, nudging his legs harshly as it threw grief-filled explanation after grief-filled explanation. He swayed on his paws and desperately blinked his already-blurring eyes.

He wanted to cuddle up to his mother's starry pelt and wail until she comforted him. He wanted to race to his brother and sister and whimper about his worries until they played mossball to calm him down. He wanted to sink into the ground and never return. He wanted to soar into the sky and never come back. He wanted to claw all the sickness, all the pain, all the hurt and the anger that came with being in this life and sink his claws into its soft, plumy belly fur.

He sunk his claws into the floor. He suddenly felt an overwhelming emotion start to swirl inside of him. It started as a light simmer of irritation, but it soon boiled quickly and spilled into a furious swarm of emotion.

A silence seemed to fill the space between the cats as Owlpaw seethed with anger.

Suddenly, Hazelberry's voice broke the silence.

"It's okay... We should go help them."

Shock seemed to resonate deeply with all the cats as another silence swirled around the cats. Owlpaw felt his anger drain through his

paws, sinking into the torn up earth beneath his paws, being replaced by surprise.

"What?" she snapped irritably, her head snapping around as she glared at them, "*What?!*"

Flintpath gaped, "You... you want to *help* the other Clans?"

"I'm a medicine cat! It's my duty to *help* the Clans!" the medicine cat retorted. Her gaze was as sharp as ice.

Sedgestorm shared a bewildered look with Owlpaw.

"How do you plan on helping them?" asked Sedgestorm.

Her eyes narrowed as she seemed to have surged deep into thought for a moment. Then, she looked up, a determined look on her face. Her whiskers twitched absently and she smirked.

"Well..."

^~^~^~^

After bickering, explaining, hissing, and a few curled lips, MudClan came up with a plan.

Now they stood, well-fed and sleek-furred, at the entrance to their camp. The wind seemed to swirl excitedly around them, slightly brushing up their fur, though not enough to ruin the well-groomed pelts of the cats. Each of their heads was lifted slightly and their chests puffed out. Their gazes were sharp and slightly curious.

"Are we ready?" The words came from Hazelberry.

*Why do we have to agree with you?*

"Yes," whispered Stonestar, who trembled slightly. He ducked his head and shuffled his paws nervously. His gaze darkened as he stumbled slightly, his fur rising anxiously.

Hazelberry hissed and shoved him, to which the leader stood up, unsteadily, straighter.

"How about you, Sedgestorm?" she prompted, "And you too, Flintpath. Owlpaw too!"

*Why did this have to be prompted by* your *idea?*

A muffled "mhmm" came from Sedgestorm, followed by a similar noise from Flintpath. Owlpaw could tell they didn't truly mean it... or at least he thought so. He hoped so.

"Owlpaw?" She asked. Her voice held a strange venom to it. It almost seemed as if she was slowly dripping a neon-colored venom into her tone of voice, cradling the source of it in her throat carefully. She narrowed his eyes at him as she seemed to release more venom into her voice as she spoke again, "Owlpaw? Hello? Are you ready?"

"Yes, Hazelberry."

*Why did you have to be* our *medicine cat?*

"Good," she smiled, almost sagely, as she gazed out across the territory. She began to stroll away into the territory.

*I am* not *doing this for you.*

# || chapter twenty nine

"It's time to split off."

The words rang out confidently from Hazelberry. It was time to put their plan into action.

"PineClan cats, go that way," the medicine cat flicked her tail in one direction, "And SquirrelClan cats go that way," the she-cat pointed with her muzzle in the opposite direction.

Sedgestorm and Flintpath shuffled towards where she had pointed with her muzzle, and with a tightened throat, Owlpaw walked over to where Stonestar and Hazelberry were standing.

"Remember to meet up, at least somewhat near where the Gathering would be," Hazelberry reminded Sedgestorm and Flintpath, "And don't come back without the cats."

They both nodded solemnly and padded off. Owlpaw watched them disappear over the rise of the hill. Neither of the tom's pelts reappeared.

Hazelberry flicked an ear, "Come on, Owlpaw, you're holding us up."

The tom quickly scampered after her, forcing his neck fur to lay flat.

"Now, once we see the ravaged pines, we'll know we're going in the right direction," the she-cat laughed. She acted as if she was dropping a feather and letting it spiral onto the ground, only to let it hit as lightly as ever.

*How is that funny?*

Owlpaw kept walking.

After a while, they finally came upon a ravaged forest, just as

Hazelberry had joked about previously. She flicked her tail, almost happily.

"There it is!" she announced as if the other cats hadn't already seen it. To be perfectly honest, it was very, *very* hard to miss. The snapped trees and the scattered, small pieces of sharp wood made it very obvious that it was the remains of PineClan.

The three cats carefully maneuvered their way through the forest, jumping neatly over fallen trees and knobbly roots covered with bits of snow. The springy pine needles that lined the floor of the forest were no more. Now bodies of starved prey lived among the roots and fallen trees, their eyes glazed. Some laid in awkward positions, their bodies contorted as if they were searching for food and accidentally knocked their head on something.

Owlpaw quickly sped by the awful sights and, after scenting the air instinctively, he picked up cat scent.

"There are cats," he alerted the others quietly, not wanting to scare them off if they were closer than he presumed. He twitched his whiskers.

Clearly, Hazelberry wasn't too worried about it. She strolled confidently along until she came upon a small barrier of fallen trees. Narrowing her eyes, she backed up and lashed her tail.

"Go first," she ordered Stonestar, who, trembling, jumped over it. A moment later, a yelp was heard from the other side. A soft *thump* followed it. As he was jumping, Hazelberry had lightly jumped atop the branch which was now dangling dangerously close to the edge of the crevice.

"Go!" shrieked Hazelberry. It was clear she wasn't actually worried about Stonestar. She was perched precariously on the edge of the short barrier. Her fur was in bristles as she teetered on the edge. It was clear she had leaped onto the barrier to look over the edge and now she was causing the branch to fall slowly. Her body grew closer and closer to the crevice, as did the branch.

"I said, *go*! You idiot!" she roared, voice filled with venom.

*Why would she tell me to go if she can see that it is a drop and not warn me?*

Owlpaw launched himself over the barrier with a yowl - "Stonestar!" - until he knew he was falling. Terror surrounded him and gripped him with icy claws. He had almost expected to land a moment later but he realized he was still falling.

*Oh, StarClan no.*

He squeezed his eyes shut as he seemed to plummet down forever. His heart clenched with horror as he felt his throat tighten with anxiety. This was all Hazelberry's fault.

*This is it.*

Suddenly, he felt solidity return to his paws. Fur brushed at his left and he felt a gentle nudge from his right.

"Owlpaw, you're okay," a voice meowed quietly into his ear.

Slowly, the tom opened his eyes.

Walls of stone surrounded him. Standing up, he gazed around. Beneath his paws was smooth, solid stone. He was in a crevice in the ground. The walls were straight up and had small cracks in them. Only some of them were big enough for pawholds. There were small splinters scattered on the smooth, slate-colored ground, but there were little nests of soft moss.

Presuming this was the camp, Owlpaw soon spotted the dens. There were small dips in the ground, each lined with moss and a few had feathers. Around it was small sticks lined up to provide some sort of protection. Some of the dens had a small crown of springy pine needles and some leaves, but it wouldn't be enough to protect them from the now-falling branch above them.

He gazed upwards to instantly close his eyes. Small splinters were showering down. Looking at his paws, he opened his eyes again and quickly swept his gaze around the camp.

"We have to get out of here," a voice that he recognized as

Heatherstar's asserted. He spotted the creamish-yellow she-cat weaving past a mottled gray she-cat, whom he realized was Robinstar.

"We can't... we're trapped, Heatherstar. It'll be nearly impossible to get up that wall..." It was Finchtuft who spoke, looking at the leader with a gaze that said everything.

"We have to get out," she protested, lashing her tail. Her eyes were swamped with anxiety as she looked at the walls of the camp. The leader padded toward the wall and shoved her paw in a small crack. Struggling up, her fur suddenly bushed up as she saw that she was trapped.

An ashy-gray tom sprinted over and crawled up behind her, supporting her back end as she tried to launch herself up. Her legs pushed powerfully up, but the tom, whom Owlpaw recognized as Rainpad, had struggled up behind her. She hung in the air for a moment, scrabbling for a pawhold as her claws scraped against the smooth stone.

The leader fell right onto Rainpad, crushing the tom and herself as they fell. A loud *CRACK!* echoed through the camp as they fell and a silence settled among the cats, weaving around them with wordless purrs.

A calico she-cat approached both bodies. It was Lilybreeze, PineClan's medicine cat. She nudged Rainpad, putting her ear to his flank, and then to Heatherstar's. Their bodies were contorted oddly; Rainpad's neck was twisted at an awkward angle, and Heatherstar's back was sharply angled, almost straight up, while the rest of her body hung limply over Rainpad.

She stepped back, her head lowering.

"They're dead."

Shock and grief pulsed in the clearing, but there was hardly time to mourn. They had to get out of here and fast. Hazelberry was screeching at them from above. She'd now leaped from the branch and onto solid ground. She was still leaning over the edge, eyes as

wide as the moon as she yowled at the cats below. The logs were slowly cracking and falling down.

Owlpaw watched as Finchtuft, Duckfrost, and Logbite all stepped towards the two corpses that lay in front of them. They silently dragged the bodies into one of the mini dens and lay some of the leaves on top of their dead friends. They groomed their pelts swiftly and Duckfrost wordlessly laid a feather on top of Rainpad's fur.

"You idiots are all going to die if you stay down there!" Everyone seemed to look up at the fuming medicine cat who was perched above them, "Come on!" she screeched, motioning wildly at the cracks in the wall and then at the branch.

It was falling.

# || chapter thirty

Owlpaw took in a deep breath as he watched a piece of the branch break off and fall towards them. Reddish-brown fur flashed at the edge of his vision.

It was Adderflight, PetalClan's medicine cat.

The apprentice watched as the splintering branch fell right in front of him, inadvertently creating a way to escape. In a moment, Finchtuft was swarming up the branch, leaping expertly as he jumped his way to the top of the crevice. He stood on the firm ground and backed out of Owlpaw's sight.

Adderflight followed. His steps and jumps were more clumsy and slow as he struggled up the branch. The medicine cat finally made it. Robinstar and Lilybreeze launched themselves up the splintering branch and landed on solid ground. The branch creaked as they leaped off.

Owlpaw felt as if he were rooted to the ground with terror. Fear sent icy streaks of horror through the tom as another creak from the tree filled his ears. He felt a sharp shove from his right.

"Go!" It was Logbite. The she-cat's gaze was lit up with a ferocity Owlpaw had never seen in her eyes before. She practically shoved him forward, which caused Owlpaw to stumble.

Duckfrost, appearing out of nowhere, grabbed Owlpaw's scruff and dragged him towards the branch. Lurching forward, the apprentice shook off the warrior and jumped nervously up the branch. It groaned as he continued to jump up the branch.

Owlpaw felt relief pulse through him as he made it onto solid ground. Pressing his paws firmly against the ground, he turned around to see Duckfrost wildly scrambling up. His eyes were wide and panicked as he hauled himself up and whipped around.

"Logbite! Get up here!" he screeched and suddenly Owlpaw saw that the she-cat was trying to get up the falling branch. It splintered and everything seemed to stop.

Logbite mustered an enormous leap, her back legs clearly shaking from the effort as she launched herself up. Her flanks were heaving as she scrabbled at the flat wall of stone. The branch shifted and everyone seemed to hold their breath as they watched.

The branch landed on Logbite's back, and with an ear-shattering roar, she fell. A *SNAP!* pounded in Owlpaw's ears as he looked nervously over the edge.

Logbite lay at the bottom. Her neck was twisted and her mouth was open in a soundless, panicked, horrified, agonized yowl. For a moment, her gaze brightened as she suddenly choked, letting out a coughing noise that sounded restrained, before falling limp and exposing her twisted, broken, bloody back. It was contorted and broken, the bones clearly sticking out where they shouldn't have been.

"We need to get out of here," snarled Hazelberry. Everyone's gazes seemed to drag toward her as she hissed, "Come on."

She marched off. Owlpaw, with a quiet and resigned sigh, trailed after her.

"Come on!" The medicine cat demanded, whipping around. Her lips drew back in the beginnings of a snarl.

PetalClan and PineClan shared a glance before trudging after her.

^~^~^~^

"Finally, we're here," announced Hazelberry after she squeezed through the small, leafy entrance of the Gathering island.

Owlpaw gazed around. The whole island seemed a little less than perfect. The tree seemed weaker and not as confident as it had been, its branches now reaching nervously into the dark sky. The nighttime sky confidently shoved them away and the tree shriveled under its harsh, starlit gaze.

"Oh, Sedgestorm and Flintpath are about to arrive-"

"Hazelberry? Stonestar? Owlpaw? We smelled blood. Is everything okay?"

It was Sedgestorm, padding through the entrance with SquirrelClan trailing after him and Flintpath, who trotted after him a moment later.

Owlpaw recognized Shrewfoot, SquirrelClan's medicine cat, along with Talondust and Mossheart. The latter looked much healthier than the two MudClan warriors had described him as, and Yellowstar followed them up. As Owlpaw realized Nutgaze would not be following, another relentless wave of grief crashed into him. It was numbing by now; all the death was no longer uncommon.

"Well... The camp collapsed," the she-cat replied bluntly, "Logbite, Rainpad, and Heatherstar died."

Sedgestorm's eyes widened, "What will they do without a leader-?"

"Shush," she hissed, "The plan, remember?"

Sedgestorm dipped his head, though Owlpaw could see the fur on his shoulders rising. Hazelberry gave a happy little twitch of her tail before she quickly scaled the tree. Her claws dug into the bark as she scrambled up. The medicine cat hauled herself onto the branch and let out a yowl. All of the cats walked over, gazes dark and ears flattened.

"Cats of all Clans," she announced, "I, Hazelberry-"

"MudClan," interrupted Sedgestorm quietly.

"-have decided that," Hazelberry glared at Sedgestorm, "Clans must always be in this place. I mean, StarClan wants it to be so... Therefore, I propose we make one big Clan."

Uproar did not break out. A shocked silence settled over the cats.

"How will we choose deputies? And leaders and medicine cats?" Lilybreeze called out.

"And what if StarClan does not agree?" asked Robinstar.

"StarClan will send clouds to cover the moon," Hazelberry snapped as if she was talking to an incompetent kit, "Haven't you learned anything?" She scoffed quietly.

"So what will we call it?" shouted Duckfrost.

Adderflight questioned, "And where will we live?"

Shrewfoot shared a concerned glance with Yellowstar and then the latter queried, "How are we going to rebuild the lost herb storages? And provide for all of these cats?"

"We will live here, on the Gathering island. It, of course, will need some additions and changes, which will be made in time. The herb storages can be replenished, don't worry," she assured the SquirrelClan cats, "I can fetch some from MudClan. We'll get herbs and prey from all of the territories now, so it'll be easier to feed all of these mouths."

"So what are we calling it?" Duckfrost yelled, louder this time.

"Depends on what you all want," she meowed graciously, tail waving.

"FrostClan!" Someone yowled.

"JuniperClan!" Another cheered.

"GaleClan!"

"HeatherClan!"

"RainClan!"

"MeadowClan!"

Suddenly, Hazelberry's voice broke through the clamor.

"Silence!" She screeched, "You id- independent cats need to think more like a Clan. Think of what each Clan needs or wants... or what

saved us."

"RosemaryClan!" A cat shouted.

"That sounds absolutely ridiculous," scoffed Hazelberry.

"How about RoseClan? It still represents rosemary," offered Robinstar.

Everyone glanced at each other as if saying "this is too easy". Making a Clan didn't *seem* this easy. The warrior code and their ancestors were already saved from previous Clans and they were sure they weren't giving up their beliefs. But was it really *that* simple to decide on a name, a leader, a deputy, a medicine cat, and then call yourself a new Clan?

"RoseClan!" cheered Lilybreeze. She was soon joined by the newly-formed RoseClan cats, their voices loud and confident.

"Okay... and now what?" called Finchtuft, "Nice, new Clan. We'll decide who is medicine cat and deputy in a little bit. What do we do now? Most of our families are dead. Sure, we have friends, but family is different. How are we supposed to move on?"

"Oh, and, as your leader, you will look to me for guidance," meowed Hazelberry smoothly.

*What?*

# || chapter thirty one

A deadly cold silence settled over the cats.

Owlpaw looked at Sedgestorm and Flintpath, gaze dark.

*This was not part of the plan.*

Shock pulsed inside of him for a moment as he realized what was really going on. It was soon replaced by anger.

*She did this so she could be a leader! No! Hazelberry will not lead RoseClan!*

He leaped to his paws, dark brown fur bristling.

"No!" he yowled, "This was not part of the plan! She said that we would decide *together* on the leader but now she's lying!"

Hazelberry looked sternly down at him, "Owlpaw, that is not appropriate. You know that's what we decided on."

Owlpaw flashed a pleading look at Sedgestorm and then Flintpath.

"Hazelberry, he's right," Sedgestorm stood up.

"You never said you'd be Hazelstar, and I certainly do not agree with that," added Flintpath.

Hazelberry glowered down at them. She rose to her paws, tortoiseshell pelt rippling furiously. She seemed to hold the very being of anger within her.

"You idiots cannot *hear*," she spat, each word laced with venom, "I said that *I* would lead, not we'd decide. Now, RoseClan, get these fox-dunged *idiots* out if they don't want me as their leader. I'm Hazel*star* now," she announced loudly, tail lashing furiously.

The cats of newly-formed RoseClan glanced suspiciously at each

other. It was quiet for a few moments.

"Get out," meowed Robinstar, voice completely even.

"You are not welcome in RoseClan," added Duckfrost.

Lilybreeze and Shrewfoot chipped in, "You don't *seem* like a good leader."

Mossheart murmured quietly, "I don't want you as my leader."

Hazelberry looked astonished as if this was not in her foreseen plans. She scoffed and shook her head, almost to herself. Owlpaw watched as she launched herself off the branch, her gaze sharp. She stood in front of the cats, drawing herself to her full height.

"Now, now, RoseClan needs a good leader, and we all know Stonestar is incapable of leading. I highly doubt you'd want an incompetent, weak loser for *your* leader. Robinstar is much too flat and Yellowstar is just too strict. And... you know, Heatherstar is dead, so she can't lead," she laughed, "And none of the medicine cats know how to lead like *I* do. The warriors are incapable of anything, including the dead ones!" She was thrown into a fit of laughter, acting as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

"Get out!" Robinstar had risen to her paws. Her mottled gray fur rippled as she unsheathed her claws and twitched her tail, "I said, get out!"

Hazelberry stumbled backward, "Woah... Woah, calm down there, kitty," she purred. Duckfrost had stalked forward and Mossheart, Finchtuft, and Talondust paced around her. Yellowstar had planted herself firmly next to Duckfrost. Sedgestorm and Flintpath had stood up and glowered down at her, while Stonestar sat nearby, gaze dark. Owlpaw, unsure of what to do, stood up.

"I-I'm sorry?" Hazelberry stammered, looking nervous for the first time ever, "I didn't do anything, I'm just... your leader..."

"Get out or we will force you out," Robinstar said firmly, gaze sharp as ice. She lifted a paw. Her long, curved, sharp-edged claws were unsheathed.

"I-I...!" Hazelberry yelped as Robinstar struck her across the cheek. It tore the skin and started to bleed, soaking her tortoiseshell fur. The medicine cat screamed, "Traitor! Get her, RoseClan!"

Stonestar soared over the cat's heads and landed squarely on Hazelberry. He pinned her to the ground, lips drawn back in a snarl as he unsheathed his claws, sinking them into her shoulders.

"Stonestar, I thought we were f-friends..." stuttered Hazelberry. The wind was clearly knocked out of her as she continued anxiously, "Don't hurt me... please? I'm sorry, I didn't mean it."

The plain gray tom smiled, "For all that you've done to me? No. I will make sure that you get out of here, by my claws or StarClan's."

Stonestar's gaze suddenly lit up as he reared up and scored his claws across her belly. The medicine cat instantly convulsed and screeched, her soft, plumy belly fur quickly becoming stained with dark crimson blood. She yowled in agony again. Clearly, the she-cat did not have a high pain tolerance. Wailing, she tried to push back at him, but Owlpaw could tell she was in too much pain to do hardly anything against her attackers.

Stonestar clawed at her as Duckfrost slashed at her paws. Yellowstar had approached and given her a long scar down her side and a few others had joined in with the slashing at her body. Sedgestorm and Flintpath even had given her a bite to remember.

Owlpaw watched, horrified. Hazelberry was a terrible cat, but *nobody* deserved this.

"Stop!" he exclaimed.

Everyone shared a baffled look.

"Excuse me?" Stonestar whipped around, "You *want* this pitiful excuse of a cat to live?"

"No," replied Owlpaw instantly, "but I just... I know she's terrible. She doesn't deserve RoseClan. But nobody deserves... deserves that."

He motioned at her slashed paws, weak legs, soaking-red belly, and

her terrified, agonized expression.

"Oh, so just put her out of her misery," clarified Adderflight, "I can go get some deathberries."

Owlpaw shook his head, "No... just let her go."

"What? Why? Shouldn't we torture her so she knows what *we* went through? And what if she lives?" asked Duckfrost.

*We? I didn't know you were in MudClan,* thought Owlpaw.

"She won't live, especially after what you've done," responded the apprentice, "And it appears as if she's already in enough pain."

Stonestar growled and backed off the she-cat, though he gave her one last scratch, which started to bleed, dark maroon blood seeping from the wound. Duckfrost shuffled away, sitting next to Mossheart and beginning to chat quietly. Talondust shifted and sat next to them, quickly joining the conversation.

Hazelberry had stumbled to her paws and began to sway toward the entrance. Her paws shook as she placed them gently in front of each other. Owlpaw watched as she trailed toward the entrance of the new camp. She tripped and fell, dust clouding around her. She did not get up. A trail of blood was spattered on the ground where she had walked.

Owlpaw approached her but Stonestar's furious voice broke through the clearing.

"Don't even!"

Owlpaw looked back, "But we can't just have a nearly-dead body just laying in our camp!"

Robinstar and Yellowstar had padded to stand beside Stonestar and they, too, gave Hazelberry's mutilated body a belittling look.

Yellowstar approached him with a distasteful look on her face, "If you want to deal with that," she waved her tail to Hazelberry, "Then go ahead."

Owlpaw swallowed the lump that rose in his throat and he turned around, padding slowly to Hazelberry. Forcing away the disgust that swirled in his belly, he picked her up and she moaned quietly. Padding out of camp, he tried not to vomit on the stench of blood.

He knew she was dying. She groaned every now and then and her tail tip would twitch as if she were going to convulse. Though, she didn't; her body was oddly still.

However, Owlpaw was sure her labored breathing was one thing he would never forget.

# || chapter thirty two

"O-Owlpaw..."

The apprentice's head swiveled down to where the she-cat's feeble tone was coming from. He was heading for MudClan's territory as it was the only place he knew where deathberries were. If he could quickly get rid of her pain, all would be fine. He'd scrape some dirt over her and then he'd go back.

But now she had tried to scramble away from him, body twitching as she tried to jerk away from him. Her gaze was brighter than it had been before. She seemed to have a renewed energy within her as she looked pleadingly up at him.

"Please s-save me... I... Don't be like the rest of th-them. They're all h-horrible and awful c-c-cats. I know... I know that's n-not... You can h-help me... Please save m-me... There are-... are some h-herbs in MudClan's c-camp... Please tell me we are going th-there..." she heaved for breath as Owlpaw realized he had reached MudClan.

*Is it really this close?* he wondered absently, blinking as he dragged her into camp.

Gazing around at the camp, he was sucked back into a whirlwind of memories. Sedgestorm, Flintpath, Heronleap, even Meadowdapple... He almost thought he could see Ashkit and Maplekit twirling around camp and their parents watching proudly... Sedgestorm, Flintpath, and Heronleap all sat together, eating a plump, delicious-looking rabbit. Stonestar was sitting regally nearby. His head was lifted and his ears were perked, though his gaze was slightly darkened.

"Owl-Owlpaw..."

Hazelberry's choked voice interrupted his thoughts and the faint shapes disappeared, sinking into the ground.

With a half-tired, half-irritated huff, he quickly padded into the medicine cat's den. Sniffing the air, he finally found a small pawful of small, red berries. They were tucked in a small leaf, carefully wrapped and put in a small tuft of grass. They smelled different than the rest of the den, their sharp, though somehow sweet, smell reaching his nose right away.

Flinching, he carried them carefully back out to where Hazelberry was. She was twitching still and despite being far away, he could hear her loud, labored breathing.

Approaching her cautiously, he laid down the berries next to her and peered over her.

Her gaze was light and airy as it focused on the apprentice. She reached up to him, her paw trembling as she tried to pull him closer as if he would give her more life.

"Owl-Owlpaw..." she stuttered and Owlpaw backed up. She had unsheathed her claws. They glinted dangerously as she reached up.

He grabbed the deathberries and hid them behind his back. Her nose twitched as her gaze suddenly grew intense.

"N-no..." she whispered, "No..! I won't l-let that happen... Get away from m-me, you mur-murderer! I thought you c-could help m-me... Pl-please don't... Murderer...!"

*Am I really a murderer? Could she live?* He wondered, gaze flashing. *Am I really saving her or am I just making it worse?*

*No! I* said *there was no way for her to survive and I wasn't lying to them.*

"Just..." Owlpaw realized this was going to be harder than it looked.

*How do I get her to open her mouth long enough? She's already in enough pain and I don't want to prolong it... That's why I'm here,* he told himself, *to stop her pain.*

Suddenly, he had an idea.

He shoved the deathberries in front of her muzzle, leaving them precariously close to her muzzle, dangling them above her mouth.

"N-no!" she yowled, eyes stretching wide as she desperately tried to scrabble away. Her gaze held terror, pain, fear, horror, and betrayal, all at once. Her claws scraped against the dirt beneath her as she managed to roll over. One of her long scratches reopened after being clumped with dirt and blood oozed out.

Swallowing a lump of horror that rose in his throat, he kept them in front of her muzzle as she opened her mouth to scream.

He dropped them in.

A strangled howl came from her mouth as she swallowed them. She instantly shoved a paw into her mouth, clearly trying to scrape the berries out of her mouth. When she realized she had swallowed them, her gaze grew terrified as she suddenly convulsed, foam pooling around her mouth. She tried to force herself to vomit, but it wasn't going to work.

The she-cat lay, spasming, on the ground. Her flanks were rising and falling at an alarmingly fast rate. Foam dripped from her muzzle, adding to the blood that was pooling around her. She let out another strangled cry, reaching out with unsheathed claws. She caught Owlpaw's ear and yanked it toward her. With a screech, the apprentice swiped at her and plunged his claws into her belly. He hated the feeling of the blood staining his claws. His stomach flopped.

She unlatched her claws from his ear as she let out another ear-splitting howl. The medicine cat choked for a moment, eyes widening. She scrabbled frantically for a second until she spat out a small, red seed. Satisfaction seemed to warm her gaze before she vomited again, this time with more foam and blood.

With a final cry, the medicine cat fell still. She twitched for a moment longer, her eyes fluttering open and closed before her flanks stopped heaving. Her eyes did not close; they sightlessly stared ahead, empty, dead, and cold. Owlpaw felt like he, too, were going to vomit. Stepping away from the scene, he forced himself to

take deep breaths. His head spun rapidly, dizzying the apprentice.

*In, out. Breathe. In, out.*

He told himself sternly, keeping his gaze on the tuft of fur on his leg.

*A dark brown tuft of fur. My fur. Just my fur. My clean fur.*

With a deep breath, he turned around and quickly headed into the medicine cat's den. Grabbing a few leaves and a bit of moss, he exited and kept his eyes trained carefully on the ground.

Looking up a little, he saw her body. Quickly, he threw the moss and leaves over it and scraped up pawfuls of dirt. He gently patted down some of the dirt near her and he laid some branches that were scattered around camp on her, too.

Turning around, he silently thanked StarClan that he was still alive. He realized that he hoped he'd never see Hazelberry's ruinous face ever again. He hoped RoseClan's future generations would learn of the horrors committed by the tortoiseshell she-cat and learn from her horrible mistakes.

Breathing deeply, Owlpaw padded away from everything he'd ever known and toward his new life in RoseClan with intentions to leave Hazelberry behind.

# || chapter thirty three

"...she's gone... we need to decide who will be the leader, deputy, and medicine cat will be. And rebuild this camp once Owlpaw is back," Owlpaw caught the tail end of Robinstar's words as he finally made it back to camp.

He shook away the previous events with a lash of his tail.

*That's over now. Focus on RoseClan. You are* not *a murderer.*

A small voice protested, *But she just wanted to survive!* He shoved it away, trying to forget.

"What?" Owlpaw asked, padding up to the group of cats. He noticed Stonestar had drawn back from the group and Owlpaw shot him a confused look. The leader ducked his head.

"Oh, you're back!" exclaimed Adderflight.

Owlpaw nodded, "She's gone."

"Good," grumbled Robinstar.

"Now, we need to decide who will be the leader, deputy, and medicine cat. We'll rebuild the camp after that, I presume," offered Shrewfoot.

Talondust and Mossheart shared a glance and Duckfrost scuffed his paw against the ground.

"How are we going to decide?" asked Sedgestorm, "There's no time to consult StarClan... We need to decide really soon; maybe even now."

"We can vote?" suggested Finchtuft. The warrior disappeared in a clump of bushes and returned with some rocks. He passed one out to each cat and then dipped his head, backing up.

"Ah, um, excuse me..." Stonestar said quietly as all gazes seemed to switch onto him. He continued, "I... am not being the leader..." He ducked his head, embarrassment flooding his gaze, "I'm... I'm sorry. I don't believe I'm fit to be the leader. I'm on my last life, too, and it wouldn't be in everyone's interest to have me as the leader..."

"...so as leader of MudClan, I strip myself of my nine lives and my position and name as the leader and go back to Stonecall. I also... wish to retire to the elder's den... I'm sorry."

Silence swirled deeply within everyone as they looked at him, clearly shocked.

"Just place it here for Robinstar and here for Yellowstar," muttered Finchtuft, pointing at the ground in two different spots with a flourish of his tail.

Owlpaw rolled the slate-colored, smooth rock slightly in his paw.

*Who am I supposed to vote for? Stonestar - Stonecall - doesn't* want *to lead. I hardly know either of the possible cats I'm supposed to vote for. I want to make sure I'm choosing the right cat, but how can I choose one if I don't know either of them?*

He rolled it around in his paws before realizing that Flintpath was approaching him. Sedgestorm followed at a slower pace.

"Who are you voting for?" asked Flintpath.

The apprentice replied, "I don't know... I know that Stonesta-" he stopped and corrected himself, "*Stonecall* would've been a less than preferable leader, but I don't know either of the other leaders."

"I think you should vote for Yellowstar. You know that SquirrelClan is generally more methodical of the Clans and we need a smart leader so RoseClan can blossom. I'm not saying Robinstar would be a bad leader necessarily. PineClan is more kind and bouncy, but I'm just saying that... I think Yellowstar would be better... especially in RoseClan's time of need," advised Flintpath, whose eyes were narrowed in thought. Sedgestorm nodded in agreement. The tom's head bobbed almost lazily, green eyes shadowed.

All around Owlpaw were discussions. Everyone was deciding who would lead RoseClan.

"Also!" announced Finchtuft, raising his voice, "Whoever is not chosen as the leader will be revoked of their nine lives and stripped of their leaderly names, and instead be the deputy. We will choose the medicine cat... or cats... next."

Owlpaw turned away, torn. He knew that a clever cat would certainly be needed for RoseClan. But he just couldn't think of having such a *smart* leader. His leader had always been reserved and, generally, quiet, ever since the sickness. Yellowstar would do anything for her Clan, including sacrificing her nine lives. That went both ways; he knew Robinstar would give her lives up in a heartbeat. Did he want a smart leader or a kind leader?

*Smart leader.*

The apprentice trotted over and dropped his stone in the pile that was Yellowstar's. Sedgestorm and Flintpath followed him, though Owlpaw watched as Stonecall quickly placed his stone in Robinstar's pile. Sedgestorm trailed slowly back to where Flintpath was sitting.

*Did I make the wrong choice?* He wondered.

*No,* Owlpaw told himself, *Stonecall's decision should not affect yours.*

A small voice inside his head whispered, *And neither should Sedgestorm and Flintpath's,* but it was silenced before it could continue.

As he watched both piles slowly grow, he realized that Robinstar had more rocks. Surprise flashed through him. The cats of RoseClan would rather have a bouncy, kind, though still quite clever, leader, rather than a methodical, thoughtful, intelligent planner for their leader?

Finchtuft, after sorting through the rocks, shuffled his paws and looked around at the cats.

"Cats of RoseClan," he called and the chatter silenced almost

instantly, "It has been decided. Robinstar will lead RoseClan, and Yellow*spark* will be the deputy!"

"Robinstar! Yellowspark! Robinstar! Yellowspark!" The cats cheered. Robinstar stood up, looking humbled, as she nudged Finchtuft away and sat on the small pile of rocks.

She swished her tail, dipping her head, "Thank you. I am honored to protect this new, thriving Clan with my lives. I know Yellowspark will succeed me well when it is time and I am sure we can decide on a medicine cat," she glanced down at the rocks and stepped off of them as if she suddenly had realized something. She paused, "Wait. We can have three medicine cats," she realized, "So Lilybreeze, Adderflight, and Shrewfoot can all be the medicine cats."

"Lilybreeze! Adderflight! Shrewfoot!" cheered the Clan. The medicine cats dipped their heads.

"We promise to care for you all for as long as we live," Lilybreeze murmured.

"We will not forget those who have walked before us, but we will be sure to look to the future StarClan has blessed us with," Shrewfoot looked up from his paws and Adderflight inclined his head.

Some cats took up an excited cheer. "RoseClan! RoseClan!"

Robinstar cleared her throat, "Now, this camp will need some rebuilding, as you can tell," she waved her tail at the leaves strewn everywhere, "I first would like all of the dens to be made. Mossheart, Finchtuft, Sedgestorm, and... Talondust, you four can work on the dens. We'll need an area for the medicine cat's den. That should be quite big," she reminded them, "Make sure there are four nests. The nursery should be well protected too, and the warrior's den should be quite large. I know we'll have new warriors soon," she smirked, winking.

"Flintpath and Duckfrost will go hunting," she meowed, waving her tail at the two named cats, "And it is your duty to make a little fresh-kill pile for us."

Robinstar, after sending off the cats, turned to Owlpaw. She approached him with a warm smile.

"And you will help me with the camp wall. We will rebuild it strong and tall and we will outline some areas in camp."

Owlpaw blinked, "Okay."

"Oh, also, you won't be doing apprentice duties," she told him as she began to stroll out of camp, "Though we will need moss for now."

The apprentice smirked and bounded after her. For the first time in a very long time, everything felt okay. Hazelberry and her awful, ruined personality were gone. The Clans no longer had to struggle alone. They could join together and never fall, living in harmony.

He took a deep breath in of fresh, crisp, clean air. The apprentice's warm golden gaze traveled around, taking in the territory.

It was not new but, somehow, it felt better to be there.

# || chapter thirty four

Spotting Robinstar's mottled gray pelt, he dashed after her and he was surprised to discover that she was heading to SquirrelClan. Their territory was mostly destroyed by the storm.

"Maybe we can stop and do some hunting on the way back," Robinstar mewed as Owlpaw finally caught up.

The apprentice shrugged, instinctively scenting the air. He caught the ever-present smell of cat, tinged with blood, followed by prey.

"We should leave it to Flintpath and Duckfrost for now," Owlpaw replied, "They'll probably be checking all of the territories for prey, or going to one of them to completely root out all of the prey there first." Robinstar flicked her whiskers, nodding a little.

Eventually, they reached SquirrelClan's forest. Some trees stretched far into the late afternoon sky, though others splintered at the middle and had fallen.

*Those won't have any moss,* Owlpaw thought with a frown. He approached one of the trees and was surprised to find moss growing at the base of the tree. Scraping some off and rolling it into a small pile, he traveled around, gathering up a decent amount of soft, dry, springy moss.

He decided to get some grasses and branches, too, so he picked up some sticks that weren't sharp or pointy and found some grass that wasn't scratchy. He bundled it with the rest of the moss and glanced around. If he could catch something here, they'd return with materials *and* prey.

Scenting the air, the tom marked the tree next to him and quietly dropped the bundle. He crept around, only catching scents of long-dead mice or voles. Finally, he spotted a squirrel that was trapped beneath a tree.

The apprentice carefully hooked his claws around the squirrel and pulled out. To his surprise, the squirrel squealed loudly and broke free.

Clamping his paw down on the creature, he killed it with a swift bite to its neck.

Deciding to go back, Owlpaw swerved quickly through the splintering trees and shrubs, smelling the air. Catching his own scent, he traced back to his bundle and took it in his jaws. Shifting the bundle in his mouth slightly, he caught Robinstar's strong, powerful smell.

Navigating his way through the broken trees, splinters, and tangled undergrowth, he leaped expertly over tree after tree, careful to not lose the leader's scent.

Owlpaw finally met up with Robinstar, who was carrying a bundle similar to Owlpaw's and a small mouse. She praised him on his catch, and they began to head back to camp.

The apprentice's golden gaze flitted off his paws to see the new camp. Around the Gathering island was a rolling hill that dipped sharply down. It rose back up to create a hill for the camp to be on. The walls of the camp were made of brambles and thorns with grass woven in the spots that the brambles couldn't cover.

"The camp wall has been done already," Owlpaw told her as if she couldn't see it.

She nodded, almost proudly, "I know. I knew my Clanmates were going to do it for us. We'll use this for nests instead."

He stopped as Robinstar swerved ahead of him and leaped over the crevice. The apprentice followed with a quick jump, tail lashing to keep him balanced. They entered the camp.

The apprentice gazed around. He could already see outlines of the dens. Warriors would sleep closest to the camp entrance, apprentices on the opposing side... The tree was the medicine cat's den, he could tell. There was a small hole at the base of the tree.

Robinstar had padded off towards a small pile of rocks. Owlpaw dashed after her and realized that she was placing her catches in the pile. He put a little bit of moss underneath the rocks and gently laid the squirrel on top of the rocks. Robinstar placed her mouse there, too.

Then, she passed to the nursery. It was close to being completed. It was a collection of thickly woven branches and grasses that dipped slightly into the ground. The she-cat squeezed past the entrance and walked into the den, followed by Owlpaw.

"Should we make nests?" Owlpaw asked, "I mean... It probably won't be used for a little bit."

Robinstar seemed to consider this before shrugging, "It won't do any harm to lay down a little bit of moss and reinforce the den."

Owlpaw patted down a little bit of moss, settling down in it as he wove branches and grasses into the wall. His paws worked effortlessly to work in small tufts of grass into the already-thick wall. After a while, he backed away and out of the den, carrying a smaller bundle of moss and sticks.

All of the cats who were making dens were making good progress. The warrior's den was almost completed and Owlpaw could see shadowy shapes flitting from inside medicine cat's den. He breathed in the crisp, fresh air of late leaf-bare and breathed out.

*Is it really that easy?* He thought, *I mean... it wasn't too much of a big deal to begin with. But everyone is acting like the sickness never even happened. We can't forget what we lost and we can't just pretend it never happened either.*

The apprentice spotted Shrewfoot weaving out of the medicine cat's den and giving a small bundle of herbs to Mossheart. The warrior gratefully thanked the medicine cat before lapping up the herbs. Assuming that he was treating the warrior for the sickness, Owlpaw's eyes widened a little.

*So they've definitely not forgotten. But... Robinstar seemed to want to move on* so *fast... she just quickly set everything up and zoomed by*

*everything that had happened. She barely even gave a real speech. I wonder if StarClan has spoken to her about how she should deal with us.*

*Stop,* Owlpaw told himself sternly, *This is not your duty to stand around, chattering to yourself like a group of starlings, neither is it your job to wonder about StarClan and how Robinstar is leading her new Clan. You are an apprentice. Act like one, not a gossiping elder.*

With a dissatisfied twitch of his whiskers, he picked up his bundle and padded to his own den. It was opposing the warrior's den, which was closest to the camp entrance. There was some claw marks on the ground and a terribly drawn circle in the dirt, but besides that, nothing was there. With a frown, he picked out the biggest branch he had and laid it down. Grabbing the next biggest, he propped it up against the other one.

Leaning a few more branches up like this, he patted some leaves and moss between the cracks of the roof and then carefully crept into the den. Using his claws, he scraped away at the dirt, hollowing the den out. Making small dips in the ground against the edges of the den, he patted some moss and grass into one of the nests that looked comfortable.

*This is my* new *nest. In RoseClan.*

Padding out of the den, he gently laid down the bundle and gazed around camp again. His eyes swept the camp, but all he could see was working cats, weaving between and around dens.

Next to the warrior's den was a den which Owlpaw guessed was the elder's den. It looked like a half-complete bush; the branches were sticking out everywhere and there were clumps of awkwardly placed leaves. Heather was woven between some of the branches and leaves for better protection. There was a small swath of heather next to the den.

Glancing to the opposing side, he spotted the essentially complete nursery. It was a small bush-like structure, but the apprentice could see it dipped into the ground. Next to the nursery was the fresh-kill pile, where his squirrel laid proudly next to Robinstar's mouse. The

medicine cat's den was not that close to being done, which was opposing the camp's entrance.

The leader's den was to the right of the medicine cat's den. It had no scratch marks in the dirt that sketched out what it should look like except a small circle and a little creature that was supposed to look like a robin, Owlpaw assumed. With a sudden realization, he knew Robinstar was a fit leader for RoseClan - and that he'd originally made the wrong choice.

*She put her Clan's dens before her own.*

# || chapter thirty five

Sunlight streamed through the branches of the new apprentice's den. It wove itself through and around the moss and leaves, squeezing through small holes to dapple itself over Owlpaw's pelt.

The apprentice had been dismissed yesterday, by Robinstar. She had insisted he sleep after he had worked very hard. Reluctantly, the dark brown tom went to go sleep.

Now, as he stretched in his nest, he yawned, snapping his jaws closed. Deciding to give himself a thorough groom, the tom began to smooth down unruly tufts of fur.

Owlpaw finally finished. Standing up, the apprentice twitched his whiskers and strolled out of the den. His gaze traveled to the fresh-kill pile, where a skinny rabbit sat on top of a small mouse. Next to both creatures lay a sparrow.

He did notice that Mossheart and Talondust were already awake. Both cats sat near the entrance to the camp. Briefly, the apprentice wondered if they were guarding the camp for this morning, or they were finishing last night's guarding.

*I may as well get to know my Clanmates.*

Trotting over, the dark brown tom dipped his head to them in greeting. The two cats shuffled around for a bit and Owlpaw spotted their tails untwining. A smirk formed on his face, though almost instinctively, he wiped it away and cleared his teasing gaze.

"Are you here to take over the guarding of the camp?" asked Talondust right away, shifting uncomfortably after sharing an almost-nervous look with Mossheart.

"Not really...? But I can," added Owlpaw, "If you both need a rest."

Mossheart gave him a warm smile, "Thank you, Owlpaw. We'll

share the rabbit we- that... that was caught before taking a little nap."

Owlpaw nodded, sitting down as they stood up and trotted off, their heads tilted together as they whispered quietly. The soft murmurs seemed to reverberate loudly through the camp, but the words were unintelligible. Turning away, the dark brown apprentice looked back outside the camp entrance and scented the air.

*They left.*

He could smell it. They'd quickly slipped out of camp when they thought nobody had been looking. He had no idea why they had left...

*Wait! They said we'll share the rabbit that* we *and then stopped. So they must've gone hunting.*

As he decoded the smell further, he realized there were underlying tones of rabbit and another earthy, leafy smell. He nodded to himself, happy that he'd finally been able to solve something that had been hidden from him. Turning around and facing away from the camp, he studied the camp entrance and the crevice for a moment.

Pricking his ears, he heard pawsteps approaching. Looking over his shoulder, he felt curiosity flit through him. It was Robinstar. She strolled confidently toward him, each stride long and self-assured. Stopping a few fox-lengths from him, she smiled.

"Good morning. Did Mossheart and Talondust already go back to their den?"

"They asked me to guard because they were tired," Owlpaw replied.

Robinstar's ears flicked, though she nodded, "Hm.. okay. Would you like to go hunting? Sedgestorm can go with you."

Owlpaw shrugged, "Sure."

"You can go get him," she mewed, motioning with her tail at the warrior's den.

Getting up and padding away, the apprentice reviewed what he should say to Sedgestorm. *Can you come hunting with me? Do you want to hunt? Can we train? Are we training today?*

Do they even *train* anymore? He didn't know.

"Sedgestorm?" Owlpaw peeked into the warrior's den, "Are you awake?"

"I am now," a grumbly voice came from inside the den. Soon, a familiar white tom with silvery tabby stripes stood in front of Owlpaw. The apprentice realized his muzzle was grayer than it used to be. His green eyes were shadowed and tired as he looked at the apprentice, "Oh, it's you. What did you want again?"

"Do you want to hunt? Are we going to train?" The apprentice questioned again.

Sedgestorm blinked, padding past Owlpaw and into the camp. Owlpaw watched as he flinched backward at the brightness of the day, though he strolled forward.

"Sure, I guess. But I don't know what to train you since you already know pretty much everything."

*Well, don't ask me! I'm not the mentor here!* Owlpaw thought, irritation flooding him. He forced it away. *We're settling in. He's just confused.*

"We can just hunt, I guess."

"Okay," Sedgestorm began to pad toward the entrance and Owlpaw trotted after him. The apprentice walked out after him.

And to his horror, Sedgestorm jumped a little to get over the crevice, but he missed and fell.

Sedgestorm let out a bloodcurdling scream. A loud *snap!* echoed through the camp, ringing in Owlpaw's ear. Sedgestorm's yowl suddenly cut off, abruptly fading away.

Instantly cats surrounded Owlpaw. Everything seemed to quickly

blur by, whisking past his vision before he could understand what was happening. Questions about Sedgestorm swirled around him as he watched, through blurring vision, as Robinstar pulled the warrior out of the crevice.

Stumbling backward, Owlpaw fell to the ground with a little *thump*. He closed his eyes, trying to calm his rapidly beating heart and the forceful churning of his belly. It thrashed back and forth, dizzying the apprentice.

"Owlpaw! Owlpaw? What happened?"

*Too many voices.*

He looked up, warm golden gaze heavily blurred as he tried to focus on one cat. He recognized one; Shrewfoot. His pale, cream-colored face peered down at him and Owlpaw could detect panic and horror glittering in his gaze.

"Shrewfoot..." Owlpaw managed to choke out. His head felt like someone was pounding it in with a rock, blistering pain searing through his head.

"Yes, Owlpaw?" Owlpaw could faintly hear the tom's strained reply.

"What... what happened to Sedgestorm..?" He asked. His searing headache wasn't leaving. He'd ask for some herbs... later...

"He's... he's okay... Adderflight and-" His voice suddenly just... disappeared. It was already quiet, but now he couldn't hear it at all. Suddenly, it returned, a bit louder, "-check it. I need to go get..." The apprentice watched as he disappeared from his vision and returned a moment later.

Owlpaw felt a nudging sensation near his muzzle and he opened it.

"Chew and swallow," instructed Shrewfoot as he dropped some herbs into his mouth. Owlpaw obeyed, slowly chewing and swallowing. He felt the world dim slightly around him and he was vaguely aware of being dragged somewhere as his eyes closed. He could feel his breathing even out, lapsing into a steady up-down pattern.

Soft moss surrounded him and a comforting voice sounded in his ear, gentle and calming. After a moment, he fell asleep.

# || chapter thirty six

"Owlpaw, you're awake now."

It was the soothing, gentle, calm, soft voice of Shrewfoot, quietly sounding in his ear. The apprentice opened his warm golden eyes soundlessly, blinking once or twice. He carefully trailed them around the den.

Light trickled through a hole that seemed far away. He realized that he was underground. Underneath the tree. As he rose to his paws, he saw branches twining around him, spotted all over the dirt wall. A few mossy nests were around him. He glanced to his left to see Shrewfoot.

"Hi, Owlpaw," he smiled a little, "I see that you're awake."

Owlpaw nodded, "Why... why I am here?"

"You don't remember?" Shrewfoot's eyes seemed to stretch as wide as the moon.

Carefully, the apprentice traced his memories back. Realization snapped through him.

"O-oh..."

"I presume you want to know what happened to Sedgestorm," started Shrewfoot, and Owlpaw could tell the medicine cat was retracting a sigh, "He... isn't dead, but he injured his back. He's not awake right now... he always says his back hurts *a lot* whenever he's awake, so Lilybreeze gave him some poppy seeds. I don't know if he'll be able to train you... Much less walk for a bit."

"Where is he?" demanded Owlpaw. Irritation bubbled inside of him. Something had definitely been off about his mentor when he'd seen him last.

Wordlessly, Shrewfoot got to his paws and squeezed between two

roots. As Owlpaw followed, he realized there was a bigger area in the den. This part had roots all over the ceiling. He noticed that there were several off-shoots from the den; one went to the right and another went the opposite direction. He could see a shape move up and down slightly in one - he assumed it was a sleeping cat - and in the other one, shuffling noises and a growl came from it.

Next to the offshoot that Owlpaw had come from, there was yet another tunnel, but this one had a root following it. Shrewfoot lead him down this one and the apprentice spotted the sleeping form of Sedgestorm.

Owlpaw, in an effort to get to him quicker, stumbled over his paws and tripped in front of his mentor. Scrambling into a sitting position, the apprentice looked down at his mentor. Upset, he looked away.

The warrior's back was arched at an awkward angle. It had some moss and herbs patted on top of it. It looked horrifically uncomfortable. Shuddering, Owlpaw turned back and shivered again, looking at the warrior's back with a sinking feeling. Swallowing the lump that rose in his throat, he murmured something unintelligible to the warrior. He touched his nose to the tom's broken back and backed away. He walked away and out of the den.

Owlpaw looked around the clearing, mind still blurred from the scene.

*Sedgestorm probably won't be able to train me. Or even walk. So what am I supposed to do? I won't ever be a warrior and I'll have to watch my mentor drag himself around everywhere. Or have to be dragged everywhere. Can't wait for my new life in RoseClan.*

"Owlpaw?" It was Finchtuft. The warrior looked concerned, "Are you feeling better?"

The tom wanted to bitterly snap in reply, but he refused to show his irritation. "Yes, I am. Thanks to Shrewfoot, mostly."

"Oh, okay... Want to go hunting to take your mind off things?"

Finchtuft blinked at him, clearly remembering when they'd been sent together to speak with StarClan.

"I guess so," shrugged Owlpaw.

Finchtuft bounded away, seemingly wanting to leave quickly. Owlpaw noticed the sky was unusually bright, though there were some clouds flitting across the sky, darkening it slightly.

Owlpaw carefully followed, clearing the crevice in a huge leap. Finchtuft had jumped the crevice in a smooth spring. Owlpaw followed him as he headed toward PetalClan. He wasn't surprised. He figured the warrior would want to go back to where Finchtfut had lived as a kit. Both of them quickly trotted along, their ears pricked and noses scenting the air around them.

The apprentice spotted the familiar marshy territory of PetalClan and clearly, so did Finchtuft. His demeanor significantly darkened; his ears flattened, his gaze shadowed, and his neck fur rose slightly with each step he took closer to the territory.

Owlpaw scented the air, catching the smell of frog. Curiously, he trotted quietly after the scent.

Hoping that Finchtuft hadn't scented it, he picked up his pace. He wanted to catch something for the tom, who seemed upset. Owlpaw hoped it wasn't him that had done something. Reeling backward, he spotted two small frogs hopping around in a marshy clearing. Puddles dotted the area and the dark brown apprentice silenced a chuckle as one of them leaped into a puddle.

The tom crouched down, falling instinctively into the hunting crouch. His muscles tensed under his fur as he crept forward. His paws moved quickly to try and catch the creatures.

Springing forward, he slammed a paw down on one of the frogs, hopefully stunning it. Swiftly deciding to trust himself, he pounced on the other frog, biting its neck. It fell limp, and he whipped around, spotting the other frog struggling away.

He reached it as he lunged, biting its neck. Warm blood flowed into

his mouth and he flinched back, twitching his whiskers. He retrieved both catches and decided to head back. Scenting the air, he followed Finchtuft's scent to see he was barely a few fox-lengths from where he'd been before.

"Finchtuft?"

The light brown tom didn't move, hunched over.

"Finchtuft?" repeated Owlpaw, approaching the tom cautiously. He had dropped one of the frogs behind him and kept one skewered on his claw.

"It's all gone..." he whispered, voice quiet and shaky.

"Finchtuft, we have new things now."

"Sorrelflame, Heatherstar, Quailnose, M-Mousewhisker..."

"Finchtuft, I know you miss them, but you can't dwell on the past," replied Owlpaw.

Finchtuft gave Owlpaw the most desolate and lonely look he'd only seen from one other cat - Heronleap. Grief filled the dark brown apprentice.

"I can't stop thinking about what would've happened if Heatherstar... if she survived. If Mousewhisker made it. If Sorrelflame was still here. If Quailnose wasn't gone and I just feel so guilty. Why them? They deserved to live this awful sickness like everyone else. Heatherstar was so close. Everyone else in the other Clans were, too. Why them? Why them?

"Heatherstar deserved to live. She would've been such a good leader for RoseClan..." his shoulders sagged and his gaze darkened. Owlpaw could see love and grief glittering in his eyes.

"You loved her?"

Finchtuft turned a desolate gaze on the apprentice, "Yes. And we wanted to have kits."

*Oh...*

"I'm really sorry, I really am..." murmured Owlpaw.

Finchtuft collapsed, a wail escaping him. "*Why*?"

Owlpaw nudged the frog forward, unable to bear the awful scene any longer, "Finchtuft, you need to let go. They're gone."

"But why them? Why?" Owlpaw was unable to reply. Finchtuft hissed fiercely, grabbing the frog in his teeth and stalking off, "Come on. Let's go back."

"Finchtuft, I-" Owlpaw began.

"*Owlpaw*!" The tom's voice was taut and angry. "I said, *come on*!"

The apprentice picked up the frog and dashed after him.

# || chapter thirty seven

Finchtuft stormed into camp, instantly heading for the fresh-kill pile. Owlpaw followed, at a steadier walking pace, behind him. The light brown warrior dropped his frog onto the pile and stalked off, fur brushed up angrily. Despite this, the dark brown apprentice could see his shoulders sagging as he headed off.

Owlpaw dropped his frog in the fresh-kill pile, too, and gazed around camp. Some cats were in camp, which included Lilybreeze and Robinstar, who were speaking in hushed tones near the medicine cat's den. Other cats, he presumed, were out hunting, or maybe setting borders. He didn't see Yellowspark in camp. Averting his golden gaze, he swept it around the camp again. He wanted to help, but his body ached from hunting.

His ears twitched as he picked up pieces of the medicine cat and leader's conversation.

"...broken... Won't be able to... stunned..." That was *definitely* Lilybreeze.

"Owlpaw, Finchtuft... frog... angry... sad or upset, what happened? ...Duckfrost?" And that was Robinstar's reply.

He wondered what they meant. *Are they talking about me? And what happened with Finchtuft? They probably didn't know that Finchtuft and Heatherstar planned on having kits... They're just sitting around, gossiping about what happened. And what about Duckfrost? What did he do? Are they talking about a new mentor for me?*

His dark brown neck fur rose and he thought bitterly, *I don't want a new mentor. I want Sedgestorm as my mentor. Duckfrost won't be able to do anything as good as Sedgestorm.*

The apprentice didn't notice that Shrewfoot had padded up to him, a frog swinging from his jaws. The pale cream tom flicked his tail and he trotted off to a corner of the camp. Owlpaw followed him,

settling down next to the medicine cat.

"Did you catch this?" asked Shrewfoot, chewing on a piece of frog. He'd already torn away the slimy flesh of the creature and revealed the meat underneath.

Owlpaw nodded, staring at the frog. He twitched his whiskers before taking a bite. The meat was stretchy and almost flimsy, but it was delicious.

Shrewfoot smirked, "It's not too bad."

Twitching his tail in agreement, Owlpaw hungrily took another bite, and another, leaving a section for the medicine cat, who tugged it toward him with a *swish* and a swift movement of his paw. The cream tom finished the frog in a moment and he unsheathed his claws. The dark brown tom watched as he dug a small hole, nudging in the slimy flesh and the bones of the frog.

He murmured thanks to StarClan and Owlpaw did too. The two toms looked at the setting sun. It rested delicately on the horizon.

"How long was I out for?"

"A day."

*That's it?*

"Oh."

The two continued to stare at the sun. Its rays glimmered brightly in their reflecting gazes and it called to the sky for help. The darkness of twilight was slowly spreading, deep blues and jet blacks inking itself across the peachy sky.

"What happened to Finchtuft? He seemed upset after he came back with you."

"When we went to hunt in PetalClan's territory, he couldn't let go of the Clanmates that he lost. He told me... that he missed them all a lot. Especially Heatherstar... uh... they were close."

Shrewfoot flashed him a tiny smile and an edged glance as if saying to continue.

"They wanted to have kits someday, free of sickness. But she's gone."

"One day, Finchtuft will learn. He will teach his kits stories of old and days of sickness, and they won't believe that they ever happened. But they did, and everyone who died to let this..."

Shrewfoot waved his tail around at the patrol of cats that were arriving in camp. Yellowspark trotted confidently in.

"...RoseClan. Everyone who died to let RoseClan happen will not be forgotten. Never."

"Except for-" It was Mossheart, voice echoing to reach Owlpaw's ears.

"Don't," warned Shrewfoot, a growl tinging his tone. The warrior grumbled something inaudible.

Flintpath approached Owlpaw and Shrewfoot and sat down. The warrior's eyes glimmered sadly, trailing to the nursery and back.

"I miss Briarstripe. What if she could be here, with me and our kits?"

*Oh, Briarstripe.*

Instantly memories of all of the MudClan cats that had died sprung into his mind.

His brother. Father. Mother. Sister. Friends. His friend's families. Everyone. Everyone except him. And Flintpath. And Sedgestorm, Meadowdapple, and Heronleap. Stonestar. And Hazelberry. He could almost hear her venom-laced voice.

A sigh escaped him. So many cats were lost to the sands of time because hardly anyone could've survived to tell their stories.

And with a twitch of his tail, Owlpaw realized he easily could've

been one of them. So could've anyone, really.

Yellowspark's commanding voice broke into his thoughts. He realized Shrewfoot and Flintpath had an entire conversation that he'd missed.

"...borders! Be sure to mark them. All of them are in effect. We want to be sure that they are in the correct places. The old borders from the old Clans will eventually be washed away, by rain or something else, but they do not need to be marked anymore. The four Clans are no more. We will rule this land as gracefully and firmly as our ancestors did."

"RoseClan! RoseClan!" cheered a few cats.

*I'll never forget my Clanmates. But I can't dwell on the past.*

*Hey, I sound like Finchtuft. Come on, Owlpaw.*

He felt a nudge from his left.

"Owlpaw? Are you up for collecting herbs tomorrow? We don't have to go if you don't want to. Especially if you're still feeling sick. Please tell me if you're still feeling sick," Shrewfoot's voice broke his thoughts, imploring and curious.

The apprentice nodded, "Okay. Flintpath, are you coming?"

"No, I promised to help... uh..." Flintpath trailed off, "Uh... Yellowspark... with the... borders."

Shrewfoot flashed Owlpaw an amused glance before dipping his head. "I understand," he turned to Owlpaw, "Be sure to get a lot of sleep."

"I will," promised Owlpaw, rising to his paws.

He meant it.

# || chapter thirty eight

Owlpaw stretched, a yawn escaping his jaws. The light of pre-dawn shone outside, barely bright enough to light up the camp. The dark brown apprentice smoothed down a tuft of unruly fur on his shoulder and strolled into the camp. His eyes adjusted to the darkness of the morning before he spotted the creamy fur of Shrewfoot.

The medicine cat was nibbling a small mouse. Trotting over, Owlpaw sat down and stared hungrily at the creature. He hadn't eaten since the night before and his belly was lightly growling to remind him that he needed to eat. With a purr of amusement, Shrewfoot nudged the mouse over and Owlpaw quickly gobbled up the remaining two bites. Scraping a bit of earth over it to bury it, he stood up and arched his back.

"Come on, we aren't doing stretches to warm up! Let's go!" Shrewfoot rolled his eyes before dashing away and toward the camp entrance.

*I wanted to check on Sedgestorm. Oh well. It's okay. I'll check later.*

He followed the tom quickly, watching as he leaped the small ravine. Owlpaw followed suit and cleared it with a smooth jump. Shrewfoot's pace didn't slow down; he kept going at a steady, quick trot, almost lapsing into running at some points.

"What are we looking for?" panted Owlpaw as they continued to dash through the territory.

"Bindweed, fennel, and ragwort leaves, and possibly some juniper berries," Shrewfoot suddenly stopped, sniffing the air and surveying the area around him.

They were in a little oak forest that looked like it belonged to PetalClan. Blinking, Owlpaw surveyed the area.

"What... what do they look like?"

Shrewfoot darted forward, nipping at the stem of a tall shrub. It had bright, blossoming yellow flowers. He took a few of the stems and carefully remove the leaves from it. He clamped them carefully between his jaws and nodded at the plant.

"Ragwort," he blinked before turning around, "Bindweed is a ffffflower wiff pale white or pink flowers, and they should be around here somewhere," Shrewfoot's reply was slightly muffled, "Fffennel is just spiky and smells plain and bland... and juniper berries are purple or blue, and they grow on a sharp-leaved juniper bush. Smells kind of sharp, like mint, but also sweet."

Owlpaw nodded, narrowing his eyes, listening to the medicine cat's muffled speech.

"They ssshhhould be around here somewhere. All of them grow in basically anywhere, where there isn't water."

The dark brown apprentice slunk off into the bushes, golden gaze sweeping the area. Ferns sprouted all over, though some splintered trees had fallen over groups of ferns and grass, blocking the light. Other trees that had been covered in snow had puddles beneath them, and some even stood standing, tall and strong.

He spotted a flower that looked white from where he was standing and he headed over, sniffing the flower and studying it. From what he could tell, it was bindweed. He nipped off a few stems and clenched them firmly in his jaws. As he looked at the sky, he spotted a bud on a branch that was blocking his vision. It was the only one he'd seen since the last green-leaf.

He continued to search for the herbs, but he couldn't find any of the others. Scenting the air, he picked up the medicine cat's smell and followed it, heading through clumps of bushes and swaths of bracken. He leaped over a little branch and wondered if Shrewfoot was really searching hard, or if he was following a path.

He spotted the creamy tom hunched over near a bush with sharp leaves.

"Shrewfoot? Find anything else?"

The other tom nodded and he turned around, laying his bundle down. It contained bindweed, fennel, juniper berries, and the ragwort leaves from earlier.

*How come I found none of that?*

A little embarrassed, he put down his bindweed.

"Good job! I was worried I wasn't going to have enough bindweed, so we're lucky that you found so much. You can take the ragwort and bindweed," The tom nudged the herbs to him, and Owlpaw put them into a smaller bundle. He picked them up and turned around, planning to head back.

Shrewfoot brushed past him and was clearly surprised to see a clump of bushes. Instead of going around it like Owlpaw would've done, he dove into them and tried to wiggle through the clump. The dark brown apprentice could see as brambles and thorns scraped up his pelt, and a tendril wove around the tom's paw. The tendril secured itself on his paw, and as Shrewfoot tried to jerk forward, he didn't move.

"Shrewfoot, your paw is stuck," informed Owlpaw, treading carefully forward to try and unwind it. The medicine cat was trying to get it free, tugging with his leg.

"It won't come free!" growled the creamy tom, who had twisted around to claw at the tendril.

"Wait, let me help-" Owlpaw started, but a startled yelp interrupted him.

The bramble vine had let go, but not until it had scratched the medicine cat's paw quite deep. As the creamy tom flew in the other direction, Owlpaw bounded around the side of the bush, spotting Shrewfoot sprawled on the ground. His paw was covered in blood and there was a small pool of blood around his leg.

"Shrewfoot? Let me help you up, okay, are you okay?" Blood pounded in his ears as he rushed to his side, inspecting his bloody

paw. He gave it a few licks to reveal a deep wound on the side of his paw.

"Oh... that... oh... hurts..." whispered Shrewfoot, gaze glazed with pain. The herbs had fallen out of his mouth so the dark brown apprentice took them and put them with the others. He helped the medicine cat to his paws and allowed him to lean on the dark brown tom if he wanted to. Shrewfoot gratefully tilted onto him, lifting his paw up so he didn't have to injure it further.

Owlpaw took the bundle in his jaws and the two made it slowly to camp. Wind whisked by them, ruffling their fur as they finally came upon the small ravine.

The apprentice wasn't sure if Shrewfoot was even conscious at this point since he was leaning so heavily on the apprentice, so he yowled, "Help!"

A few cats emerged from the camp's entrance, leaping over the crevice with ease.

"What happened?" demanded Lilybreeze. Duckfrost and Talondust shoved their way past Lilybreeze and Yellowspark, working quickly. The two gently maneuvered Shrewfoot onto their back and they carefully stretched themselves over the ravine. Surprised, Owlpaw watched them. He could hear Shrewfoot groaning in pain.

Owlpaw's golden gaze swept over the cats and he sighed, dropping the herbs in front of Lilybreeze. She nodded curtly and leaped back over the crevice. Moments later, Adderflight came sprinting out, springing over the ravine.

"Shrewfoot and I went looking for herbs, and he got his paw stuck in a tendril of bramble and it cut him... and he said it really hurt, and it was bleeding a lot," he blinked, trying to calm his whirling mind.

"Come on, we should get back to the medicine cat's den," meowed Adderflight, nudging the tom gently.

"Wait, why?"

Adderflight nudged him again, "Just come on."

*Why is everything going wrong?*

# || chapter thirty nine

Owlpaw felt like they were acting like he was a kit.

*I can take care of myself. I'm not a kit.*

Adderflight soon ushered him into the medicine cat den. The medicine cat nudged him as they passed tangles of roots. The other tom soon showed him to the nest he had been in before and he patted down the moss in it.

"Lay down," instructed Adderflight, flicking his tail at the nest. As Owlpaw did so, the medicine cat quickly headed back to the other area of the den. Curling his tail around himself and tucking his paws underneath himself, the dark brown apprentice pricked his ears and listened to the chatter that echoed in the den.

"Shrewfoot, I need you... Shrewfoot, please, just...!"

Confusion swirled through the apprentice. Who *was* that? It sounded like Lilybreeze.

*Does she love him?*

All kinds of strange feelings leaped inside of him, controlling and moving horrifically fast. His ears flattened, belly churning nervously. *Are they breaking the code?*

A moment later he heard a quiet sigh of relief and a snapping noise. A strangled yowl of agony followed it and silence settled over the den. As the apprentice shifted his position, he saw Adderflight whisking between dens. The medicine cat dropped a few herbs in front of him.

"Eat," he ordered, nudging them closer, "And be quick, I have to help... Uh. I have to help Shrewfoot."

Owlpaw lapped up the herbs, cringing at the taste, but he gazed back at Adderflight, "I think he's fine."

Adderflight's face contorted with surprise and fury, "Did you see his paw? He lost a *lot* of blood, Owlpaw. He's weak and he's *not* fine."

"But he doesn't need you," Owlpaw pointed out, "Lilybreeze is helping him." The apprentice allowed a small amount of venom to tinge his tone.

Adderflight's fur bristled as he glared at Owlpaw, "Get out of my den if you're just going to gossip. She is helping him. Did you hear them? Yeah. She's worried as fox-dung over him because he's her friend."

"She said that she needed him," replied Owlpaw, struggling to keep calm.

"Needed him to eat the herbs!" fumed Adderflight, "I said, get out!" The medicine cat's claws were unsheathed and nervously clawing the ground.

Owlpaw huffed and rose to his paws, brushing past Adderflight. He headed out of the offshoot and sped up as he heard the quiet breathing of Sedgestorm and the mutters of Lilybreeze. He exited the den and gazed around.

Cats surrounded the medicine cat's den, eyes concerned and curious.

'What happened?"

"Is Shrewfoot okay?"

"Is his paw okay?"

"Where did you go?"

The voices surrounded him, threatening to overwhelm him. They swirled loudly in his ears, pounding in his head, churning in his belly. Owlpaw ran past them, heading for the fresh-kill pile. Hunger sent pangs through him.

"Owlpaw!" Flintpath's voice broke through the chatter. The apprentice was curling up near the fresh-kill pile, about to hook his

claw on a mouse in the pile. Flintpath sprinted over, scrambling into a sitting position in front of him.

"What happened?"

Owlpaw looked up after biting into the mouse. He swallowed quickly and replied, "Shrewfoot got his paw caught and it sliced it."

Flintpath's eyes widened as he shifted to sit next to him, "Must've been scary."

"I guess."

The way the warrior's eyes became shadowed told Owlpaw something. The way he shuffled his paws told him something else. The way the tom's gaze darted swiftly around camp told him another fact. The apprentice pushed the mouse to Flintpath, who ate it fast. Almost... too fast.

After doing so, Flintpath pushed some dirt up with unsheathed claws and nudged the mouse so it was covered by dirt. He patted it down with a swift movement and resumed his odd movements.

"You..." Owlpaw began, not sure where to start.

Flintpath looked at the dark brown apprentice curiously, tilting his head, though the bright flashing of his gaze told him something.

"Do you think RoseClan is unsafe?" asked Owlpaw, feeling as if he was treading carefully on thorns of a rose.

Flintpath's gaze darkened and he instantly wiped the shadows of emotions in his gaze as he tactfully admitted, "I... feel as if nothing is going well. Shrewfoot is injured. Sedgestorm is hurt. Maybe... StarClan wishes RoseClan to disband otherwise they will continue to harm our cats."

"What do you plan to do about it?" Owlpaw questioned, keeping his voice smoothed over and allowing no clear emotion into it.

"I cannot do too much," answered Flintpath carefully, "However, I can... speak with... Yellowspark or Robinstar about it. Or Lilybreeze

or Adderflight about their thoughts."

"They will say they believe StarClan is just giving us hurdles to be sure RoseClan can survive it," Owlpaw pointed out.

"But-" Flintpath cut himself off, closing his eyes as if he were keeping back every emotion from flowing out, "I can't... watch everyone be sick or injured just to be sure that we can survive."

Owlpaw watched the tom's reaction and then flicked his tail a little at the camp, "You've not forgotten about the sickness?"

"Don't," earned Flintpath, voice edged, "That was different. But StarClan's tests need to be in a different way... or cats will get upset and leave."

This was it. Owlpaw had known it was coming all this time. His breathing threatened to speed up as he returned his warm golden gaze to Flintpath. The words he would say, he knew, were deadly and almost treacherous to his and Flintpath's well-being. He knew he shouldn't even say it. But he *had* to.

"Like you."

Instantly, Flintpath practically collapsed, his head dropping to the ground and his whole body seemingly wracking with horrified and sad sobs. A singular wail escaped him as he fell into an awkward laying position, his face smashed against the ground as he let out another wail of pain as if someone was stabbing him with sharp claws. His speech was muddled as he cried loudly.

"Owlp-p-paw- I'm so-so s-s-sorry- I just c-can't *do it a-anymore*-" His voice came out as blubbering fits of speech as the warrior tried to look up at Owlpaw, but the sobs took hold of his body so strongly he couldn't move much. His shoulders sagged and rapidly rose again as he cried, "I'm so s-s-sorry but I just c-c-can't... I don't w-want to leave you but I can't s-stay here with RoseClan where every-everywhere I look is- is pain and agony within every- every cat who survived the- the-" He couldn't go on, cries growing louder and louder and more distressed.

Moments later, Yellowspark was practically bolting over, fur brushed up.

"What's going on? Flintpath? Someone get a medicine cat!" She yelled, shaking the tom by his shoulders.

"He... he wants to leave because.. because..." Owlpaw trailed off, tearing his gaze away. His claws sunk into the ground, trying not to break down himself. *Everyone* was leaving. Nobody was who they truly were; most were broken shells of their former selves.

He realized with a cry of grief that he was too.

# || chapter forty

"Owlpaw, it's time to wake up. It's almost sundown," a gentle voice and a little nudge caused the dark brown apprentice to be woken from his slumber.

All night he couldn't forget the words Flintpath had spoken to him. The horror and grief in the warrior's eyes was something he would *never* forget. And what happened after...

*Robinstar swarmed out of the medicine cat's den, her tail lashing as she quickly surveyed the cats in the camp. Most of the cats were awake, regardless if they wanted to be or not. Everyone was on edge, likely due to Flintpath's outbreak.*

*"Cats of RoseClan," the leader began, gaze sweeping the cats, "Recently, we have been pelted with devastations. I know this is very upsetting to most of us, but mere moments ago, our medicine cats received a vision from StarClan. Lilybreeze, Adderflight, please come up here to tell the Clan what happened," Robinstar meowed, flicking her tail at both cats, who trotted up to her after Robinstar had shuffled to the side.*

*Lilybreeze and Adderflight had a very swift discussion, heads tilted together as their quiet tones drifted around the camp. They drew away, lifting their heads.*

*"StarClan has decided to share a vision with us," Adderflight announced, "As I was sitting next to Shrewfoot and Lilybreeze, we heard a low growling. Instantly, it was like something was pressed around us, almost swallowing us up."*

*Lilybreeze's fur stood on end as Adderflight nudged her to continue, "We felt as if we were being crushed and an additional feeling of prickling in our fur soon came too. It was almost as if we were being poked..." The she-cat trailed off, gaze seemingly glazing over.*

*"And then there was sudden alleviation of the pressure... I don't know what it was, but whatever it was, it combated the pressure with strong*

*strokes that almost appeared as if it were waving it away with a wing," Adderflight resumed after Lilybreeze had trailed off. His gaze slowly began to glaze over as if it were being infused with stone, "Storms of leaves began to whip around and sparks of green fire spiraled around us. Tufts of white fur appeared out of nowhere, seemingly flying through the air, frosty pieces of small, green objects swirling around. Dust seemed to swoop in, followed by small pieces of light tan fur. Little pieces of stems and a small rattling noise filled the den..."*

*"It all disappeared with one swoop of darkness and there was just the den around us."*

*Shocked murmurs spread through the cats, gazes flashing as the two medicine cat's eyes grew bright and glimmering again. Some cats sent suspicious glances at others, ears twitching and eyes narrowed.*

*Robinstar quickly told hold of the situation, asserting, "Now, myself, Yellowspark, and the medicine cats will discuss this and get back to you all as soon as possible. For now, continuing as normal is the best plan of action..."*

But the words she had spoken just blurred onward in Owlpaw's mind. Something was very wrong in RoseClan and there was nothing he could do, nothing, nothing...

"Owlpaw, please," meowed the cat again and after opening his eyes, he realized it was Finchtuft.

The apprentice staggered to his paws and gazed around his den. He remembered the time when he thought it was safe in this den, where nothing could get to him or hurt him or injure anyone he cared for. But StarClan didn't care about *that*, no, they didn't, they wanted his friends to suffer so he had to *watch* them.

A growl nearly escaped the dark brown tom but he swallowed it back, forcing himself out of the den. Finchtuft slipped out behind him, studying the apprentice nervously. Owlpaw could feel his burning gaze on the back of his neck, making his fur prickle.

Owlpaw wanted to do it. Turn around and snap at him. Let everything out. *All* of it. From the sickness to now. Hazelberry's

incident included. *Everything.*

But the sun that was shining, despite it being sundown, his head cheered happily somewhere inside of him, swirling around elatedly, singing "New-leaf is coming, new-leaf is coming" until it really did come.

Forcing the thoughts out of his head, the apprentice headed to the elder's den. *That's not me,* he reminded himself, *I* can *be happy in RoseClan. I know it. I.. know it.* He heard Finchtuft's little "Owlpaw" behind him, but the dark brown tom paid no mind. He continued to where he presumed Flintpath and Stonecall would be.

And as he peeked in, he realized he was right. Stonecall lay, asleep, next to Flintpath, who was awake. The tom's eyes were dull. They held no emotion, no visible recognition of any capable feeling.

"Owlpaw?" Flintpath turned to him, voice flat. Stonecall lifted his head a little and after seeing the dark brown apprentice, the elder instantly put his head down.

"That's me," replied Owlpaw.

"Ah," Flintpath looked away.

"Are... are you hungry?" The apprentice queried.

"No."

"Oh... Oh.. Okay. I'll see you later then, I guess..."

"Okay. Bye."

The dark brown tom slipped out of the den, swallowing a sigh. He made a quick stop at the fresh-kill pile, snagging two mice. Next, he headed for the medicine cat's den. He hoped that the medicine cats wouldn't mind his visits. He glanced up at the tree before heading inside, ducking his head and blinking so his vision would adjust.

Lilybreeze was sitting in the main part of the den and as the apprentice entered, she jumped a little, turning around and tilting her head, "Owlpaw? What's wrong? Are you sick?"

The tom shook his head, "I'm here to check on... Sedgestorm and Shrewfoot."

"I see," she replied, "Sedgestorm's in that offshoot, Shrewfoot's over there, in case you didn't know," The calico she-cat flicked her tail at two different offshoots. The apprentice dropped a mouse in front of her and she smiled at him.

Owlpaw headed to Sedgestorm's, padding through it until he came upon a little area with a few nests. Sedgestorm lay in one of them, his back still crooked and plastered with herbs. The apprentice sat down next to him for a moment, touching his muzzle to the warrior's leg before withdrawing and heading out of the offshoot.

Swerving sharply, he quickly turned and headed into Shrewfoot's offshoot. After sneaking through a little tunnel, the apprentice came upon an awakened creamy tom, whose paw was wrapped up in a neat little bundle of herbs.

"Owlpaw!" Shrewfoot exclaimed, attempting to stand, clearly failing, huffing rather irritably, and then sitting back down, curling his tail carefully over his paw.

"Hi, Shrewfoot," The apprentice greeted him, dropping the mouse in front of him, "Enjoy."

"Thanks!" Shrewfoot dove hungrily into the creature, tearing into its soft meat with pleased purrs, "It's delicious!"

"I hope you get better soon," Owlpaw watched the tom eat.

Shrewfoot smiled, "It's healing well."

"That's good," The apprentice replied, "I should... be hunting now. I'll see you later."

"Thanks for the mouse!" exclaimed Shrewfoot as the dark brown tom slipped out of the den. As he passed Lilybreeze, he gave her a little nod and exited the medicine cat's den.

Cats were gathered.

*What did I miss?*

Robinstar's gaze snapped to Owlpaw; she had clearly called everyone together for a meeting. She blinked at him.

"Just in time."

Owlpaw hurriedly shuffled over to sit at the edge of the crowd, curling his tail swiftly over his paws. Everyone's gazes burned into his pelt and he felt as if he was being burnt to a crisp from their scorching eyes. The sun, which now sat on the horizon, even stared at the apprentice.

"I have heard that there is a cat in this Clan who has worked very hard to be where they are now, and especially to stay there. Their life has been plagued with hardships, but this certain cat had to watch all of their rank disappear," Robinstar meowed, sweeping her gaze over the gathered cats, "And this cat has been rewarded very minimally. Today, I think it is time to give them their warrior name. Owlpaw, please step forward."

All gazes flicked back to the apprentice. He rose to his paws, muscles stretching and contracting under his sleek dark brown fur as he padded forward. He stood in front of Robinstar, head lifted.

"I, Robinstar, leader of RoseClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. He has trained very hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn. Owlpaw, do you promise to defend and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Two simple words. It should've been easy and painless to speak them. In a smooth tone, right? Just like always. But the weight of them pressed down the tom's voice. A silence spread over the cats. The tom could feel the edged glances, the irritable glares, the confused looks, icily scorching his fur.

And then magically, almost like StarClan had relieved the pressure, he could speak again.

"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Owlpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Owlshade."

Instantly, cheering broke out around him.

"Owlshade! Owlshade! Owlshade!"

The words swirled above camp as the newly named warrior dipped his head to Robinstar.

"And," she raised her voice over the cheering, "A new tradition will be implemented today. Instead of warriors sitting guard at the camp entrance, each new warrior will tell a story of a cat that has passed due to the sickness, beginning after their ceremony. That night, they will sleep in the middle of the warrior's den, in the warmest spot possible, and the deputy will sleep next to the senior warriors. I hope this will inspire generations of storytellers and ensure that nobody will forget what occurred."

"RoseClan! RoseClan! Owlshade! Owlshade!" The Clan began to cheer.

"Owlshade," Robinstar flicked her tail at him and dipped her head, shuffling out of the way, "You may tell your story now."

The warrior rose to his paws, a sense of calm filling him. He had never had everyone's attention for this amount of time before and if he did, his words were not taken into account. He thought of speaking about Hazelberry, his family, Meadowdapple, Heronleap, Nutgaze, Rainpad, Logbite, Sorrelflame... Whitepaw... Ashkit, Maplekit...

*No. None of them are good choices. I can't single out one cat.*

*Wait!*

Owlshade straightened his shoulders and lifted his head.

"My story will be about the past versions of ourselves that we have lost," announced the dark brown tom, "We all acted a different way before the sickness. Some of us were happier. Some of us were kinder. Some of us were more extraordinarily proud of their

actions. Some of us were louder - some were quieter. We all changed, for the better or for the worse. It all depends on how you look at it.

"If you grew quieter, you can take that as a more observant personality you've grown into. If you're more actively engaged in conversations, maybe you just needed something to wake you up from your quiet slumber. It all depends on how you take it. But I do know one thing that goes for everyone here."

"We all changed, no matter if you like it or not. We all changed and you cannot go back to your past self, no matter how hard you try. Now, you must learn how to settle into your new self, whether that means you learn how to be more observant, or more outgoing, or maybe more kind. But we all changed - there is nothing you can do about that - and you have to learn to accept that. Our past selves are no more. RoseClan will rise to be the greatest Clan StarClan has ever seen. I *know* it."

As Owlshade spoke, he felt it. The feelings of sadness and grief and anger and uncertainty and everything bad, all slowly leaving, all slowly skipping and slipping away. The feelings of hope, of happiness and pride skirting in and skittering to a stop at the tom's paws. He felt power course through him, like he could do anything he wanted with his new name and his speech. He felt like the moon could become light if he wished it so, the sun could become dark if he wished it so, and everything was right at his paws. Everything to help Robinstar, Yellowspark, and the medicine cat's journey to help RoseClan bloom.

And he started the cheer, the amazing cheer that swirled and howled its way through the clearing, searing its way through everyone's mind and clearing the area of anything bad. It replaced the bad with good; the anger with placidity; the grief with hope; the sadness with happiness...

*"RoseClan! RoseClan!"*

**What will you do with your new self?**

# || epilogue

"She was killed by Owlshade when he fed her deathberries," announced the light cream she-cat, tail flicking in excitement. She'd just been named a warrior, and due to the moon-old tradition that she'd been told the legendary Robinstar had implemented, every new warrior told a story of a cat in the times of The Sickness.

"Hazelberry was hated for many moons after," the she-cat concluded, "Though we learned to never act in a way that she would have."

"Swallowfur! Swallowfur!" RoseClan cheered her name, and with a flushed look, the new warrior stepped back, giving her brother room. Swallowfur gave him a playful, loving nudge.

The tom, who was generally a quiet cat, yet still a hard worker, inched forward. His sharp green gaze surveyed the cats who he'd grown up with his whole life and the area he'd lived in for his entire time here in RoseClan... and realized this was the exact same place that cats from The Sickness had lived too.

"My story will be about Owlshade."

This particular warrior had been thinking about his story forever and ever, going over again and again... *Who should I choose?* After carefully considering his choices - some of which included Sedgestorm, Shrewfoot, Flintpath, Mossheart, and Finchtuft - he eventually brought it down to a specific little bunch of cats.

It had been Owlshade, Yellowspark, or Talondust. He preferred to pick a cat who was perhaps a little underappreciated. Yellowspark had died soon after RoseClan had suffered a drought in Greenleaf and that had forced Robinstar to pick a new deputy. He felt as if she deserved *more*; she deserved to live past that Greenleaf and see RoseClan blossom even further.

Talondust, in the stories, had always been a background character.

A character who worked just as hard as anyone else, though he never got any "special" treatment. Everyone forgot about them after they went to the Moonpool. And Owlshade was the minor character who had an interesting story arc as the next character in the stories they'd been told. He had been an apprentice through the entire sickness, and when he was made a warrior, he settled down to be a hardworking, kind, thoughtful cat.

Of course, the newly named warrior had chosen Owlshade. Not because his mother had chosen Whitepaw, one of Owlshade's dead friends, which also had something else to do with it... Certainly not. He just... liked Owlshade. He couldn't explain it any better than that, because that was the truth.

"Owlshade was born to Briarsplash and Liontooth. His two siblings, Sparrowfeather and Wrensong, were from a previous litter. His mother and father always seemed to be busy, rushing around with things to do. He grew close to his siblings, and when the sickness took their lives, he grew quieter. The now-apprentice always had been kind, so if he could help out around camp, he would certainly do so. The apprentice was close friends with Whitepaw, from SquirrelClan, and some even speculate they had a closer relationship than presumed.

"Sedgestorm, his mentor, tried to train him as much as he could, but that wasn't exactly ideal for the situation they were in. MudClan was down to a few cats; Stonestar, Hazelberry, Sedgestorm, Heronleap, Meadowdapple, Flintpath, and of course Owlpaw. Heronleap and Meadowdapple decided it would be a great time to have kits, so they did.

"Unfortunately, Meadowdapple died in the process of birthing them, for she was sick. The kits were named Ashkit and Maplekit and both died due to the sickness their mother carried. This left Heronleap in a broken state. Owlpaw, who had not really grown close to Meadowdapple nor the kits, was upset about this, but knew there was nothing he could do to help them come back. They had a Gathering soon after this, where Whitepaw was announced as being dead. Owlpaw was very upset, clearly, as now he realized he was the only apprentice in all the Clans.

"The next morning, he awoke to an herb, namely rosemary, telling him to go to the Moonpool. He complied and met up with the youngest cats of all the Clans; Finchtuft, Talondust, and Logbite. They were all told that the cure was under their noses, and all cats went back and told their leaders and medicine cats. Hazelberry convinced Stonestar to test all the herbs in the den and not tell the other Clans that there was a blizzard. Soon after there was a blizzard, which affected Owlpaw quite a bit. He had came back to camp to see it full of snow, but instead of leaving, he invested a few wails he'd been hearing. He realized it was Heronleap and desperately tried to save the warrior.

"Sadly, it was too late. Owlpaw buried the tom with a rabbit and headed out, where he found Hazelberry and Stonestar nearby the rest of the Clan. After most of the snow melted, they headed black with a cure. Owlpaw, Hazelberry, and Stonestar would go to PineClan to gather up the cats there and bring them to where our camp is now, and Sedgestorm and Flintpath would go to SquirrelClan. PetalClan had been staying with PineClan, and unfortunately a few deaths occurred. However, they continued, and the cats met up.

"Hazelberry instantly asserted leadership and was called out by Owlpaw. He stood up against one of the most powerful she-cats in his time and we all deeply appreciate that. Think of how different it would be. He took her away, where he supposedly killed her, but nobody is truly sure of what happened that day. He watched the Clan bloom until he retired and became an elder. Owlshade never had kits and never took a mate, though that does not diminish his accomplishments. He died peacefully in his sleep, sitting quietly alone in the elder's den."

The warrior paused, taking a deep breath and flicking his tail a little. His heart pounded as he concluded his speech.

"Owlshade was the apprentice who lived what warriors could not."

Instantly, the crowd of gathered cats began to shout and cheer a mixture of words, all mesmerized by the lovely storytelling of the new warrior. Some even leaped to their paws, voices twirling and swirling together to make it echo.

"Whitestreak! Whitestreak!" They roared, "Owlshade! Owlshade! RoseClan! RoseClan!"

And somewhere, up above, a dark brown apprentice had his tail curled over his paws curtly, and was watching with a little smile on his muzzle as the cats' cheer rose to StarClan.

# || note and trivia

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the end! You did it! You read it the whole way through- hopefully! And if you did, thank you *very much* for doing so, because this book took a year and more's worth of effort to make and publish fully. I am extremely proud to say I am finished this book and even more proud to say I now have a completely finished book on my profile.

I wholeheartedly thank you.

Onto the trivia.

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|| The quote at the end of the epilogue - "Owlshade was the apprentice who lived what warriors could not" - has been with me the entire time I've been writing this book. I had a plan to use it in the last chapter but went back on it and decided to include it in the epilogue.

|| Stonecall was originally supposed to die, in place of Heatherstar, and I planned on having Finchtuft and Heatherstar have kits. Their names would have been Sheepkit and Thrushkit.

|| Owlshade's name actually switched around a lot at the beginning; at first, it was going to be Owlwing, then Owlfall, then Owlwhisper, and then I realized none of them fit. Owlshade was a much better alternative.

|| The idea of this book was 100% on a whim. I just started writing it a year ago and didn't think I'd still be writing it now. I thought of the idea one night and just scribbled down some notes. I saved it for later.

|| Owlshade's brother, Sparrowfeather, is actually from my series before this - the Sparrowfeather Series - and has obviously been removed since.

|| Owlshade's parents named their kits after birds because they liked that type of prey the best. Owl-, Wren-, and Sparrow-.

|| Whitestreak is named after Whitepaw. His mother, Dappleleg, had always liked Whitepaw's story, and she decided to name her son after the apprentice.

|| Owlshade is frequently haunted by nightmares of Flintpath's incident.

|| The next leader of RoseClan was Finchtuft - obviously Finchstar. After Yellowspark died, Robinstar was very upset over her deputy's death, but regardless named Finchtuft as her deputy.

|| Flintpath never 'recovered' from his incident - he died a few moons later.

|| The first litter of kits was Mossheart and Duckfrost's litter. Mossheart had a litter of four, named Littlekit, Blackkit, Vixenkit, and Leopardkit.

|| The second litter of kits was Yellowspark and Talondust's litter. Yellowspark took a little time off from her deputy position to care for her litter of three; Honeykit, Dustykit, and Rowankit.

|| All of the kits' warrior names are as follows; Littlespring, Blackbloom, Vixentail, Leopardspot, Honeyflower, Dustyleap, and Rowansplash. Littlespring and Rowansplash had three kits later on, and Leopardspot and Dustyleap did as well.

|| Juniperstar, Pigeonear, Icespeckle, Coaldawn, and Doestar were all cats from each Clan. Juniperstar and Doestar were from SquirrelClan and PineClan, and Coaldawn, Pigeonear, and Icespeckle all were in PetalClan. Coaldawn, Pigeonear, and Icespeckle all lost their lives because of the sickness.

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That's all.

There will be a new book that *does not* have to do with this book, however, I'm sure you will still like it regardless. There will likely

be an addition to this book about it.

Again - *thank you for reading.*

**<3**